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Editorial: The Cooperative Advantage for Community Development

ABSTRACT

Empirical evidence has shown that cooperatives are diverse organizations that efficaciously address a plurality of socio-economic needs. Cooperative organizations are effective in provisioning for myriad life needs, and do so in more democratic and sustainable ways than investor-owned firms. Rooted in the unique principles and values that distinguish them from other business types, cooperatives, in a nutshell, embody what has been called "the cooperative advantage". This special issue of the *Journal of Entrepreneurial and Organizational Diversity,* "The Cooperative Advantage for Community Development", was organized to highlight the myriad roles that cooperatives can and do have in protecting and developing communities, as well as the possible tensions and challenges that emerge in the process. Including seven articles from established and upcoming cooperative studies scholars, the special issue critically assesses diverse experiences of co-ops deployed for community development. Via papers engaged in case study approaches, political economy perspectives, critical historical research, and qualitative and quantitative methods, this special issue of JEOD critically reflects on and contributes to understanding the role of cooperatives in grounding bottom-up and locally based community development.

KEY-WORDS

COOPERATIVES; COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT; COOPERATIVE ADVANTAGE

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The 2008 financial crisis and the austerity politics that have followed have depleted communities around the world, creating the need for alternative community development initiatives to counter uneven outcomes in the market. In many national and regional contexts, cooperatives[1] are seen as important organizational tools for responding to social and economic failures and for assisting in the development and revival of local communities. This is because, as Majee and Hoyt (2011: 50) astutely observe, "cooperatives bring people together to meet a shared need through operation of a democratically controlled business… and build capital in communities where they are located".

This special issue of the *Journal of Entrepreneurial and Organizational Diversity* that we have entitled "The Cooperative Advantage for Community Development" was organized to highlight the roles that cooperatives can and do have in protecting and developing communities. We can identify numerous historical successes of cooperatives playing a role in community development. The Mondragon group of cooperatives in Spain had a crucial role in resuscitating the Basque economy post World War II. The cooperative system in Trentino, Italy has grounded and guided much of the coordination of that autonomous province's economy for over 100 years, being a central social and economic force in taking it from an impoverished region in the first years of the 20th century to one of the most affluent Italian provinces today (Salvatori, 2011). With over 20,000 co-ops throughout its economy today, Kerala, India also has a history of cooperatives underpinning its development, especially rooted in a state-and-local model emerging post-independence and focused on credit, housing, weaving, the agricultural and fishing sectors, and alleviating poverty (Planning Commission of India, 2008). More recently the Evergreen Cooperatives in Cleveland, Ohio have taken an integrated cooperative approach to community development in response to rampant deindustrialization. The Cleveland model connects worker cooperatives to anchor institutions within the community and its already existing human capacities to create a mutually supportive network (Alperovitz, 2013). These successes highlight the possibility of cooperatives in grounding and proliferating alternative forms of community development, all embedded in some vision of social and economic justice.

In times of crisis, in particular, cooperatives can stabilize community economies. This counter-cyclical tendency has been observed in the most recent global economic crisis as cooperative systems have been seen to be much more stable business models (Birchall and Hammond Ketilson, 2009; CECOP-CICOPA Europe, 2011; Sanchez Bajo and Roelants, 2011; Zevi et al., 2011). Mondragon, as one example, has maintained employment levels despite the severity of the crisis in the rest of Spain (Webb and Cheney, 2014). Cooperative banks have also demonstrated this tendency (Ferri, Kalmi and Kerola, 2014; Goglio and Alexopoulos, 2014; Lemzeri, 2014). And worker buyouts of failing conventional firms that sees employees converting them into worker cooperatives have saved

[1] The articles in this special issue use the term "cooperative", but refer to "co-operatives" where the latter form is found in quotations and organizational titles. The short form "co-op" is used to differentiate it from the pre-existing word "coop".

not only jobs and business entities but also entire communities from further decline (Jensen, 2011; Vieta, 2015; Vieta, Depedri and Carrano, 2015). Cooperatives, therefore, are central organizational mechanisms for a more resilient community economic system.

Cooperatives benefit communities in distress via what has been termed the "cooperative advantage" (Spear, 2000). Spear outlines the cooperative advantage as rooted in co-ops' particular ability to: (i) respond to state and market failures, (ii) engender trust, (iii) build a spirit of self-help, (iv) strengthen civil society, (v) promote key stakeholder participation by building on cooperative values, and (vi) create greater social efficiency and efficacy via positive social and economic externalities. Spear argues that cooperative values, in particular, lead to resilient and flexible organizations that can stabilize a community economy since members usually have deeper stakes in the community compared to dispersed shareholders. In the same vein, Nokovic (2006, 2008) argues that cooperatives can exhibit a concern for the community and mitigate market failures by internalizing externalities. Guided by motivations beyond just returns and profits, cooperatives may choose to maintain production in a location that is not sufficiently viable for investor-owned firms, may choose to hire "less productive" workers from marginalized populations (as with Italy's social cooperatives), and may choose to purchase locally produced inputs despite cheaper imports (Nokovic, 2006, 2008). Cooperatives are effective tools for community development because they can, and often do, make community interest a priority over short-term financial gain. Operating as place-based businesses (Lionais and Johnstone, 2009), they do so by choosing to locate their business functions in particular places for social rather than (purely) financial reasons.

Cooperatives on their own, however, are not a panacea for depleted communities. As well as cooperative success, there are examples of cooperative degeneration and failure. The Antigonish movement that flourished in the 1930s in Eastern Canada, for instance, faltered by the 1950s due to an over-reliance on technical and managerial perspectives and not enough on the "broader picture"; in the end, the Antigonish movement lost sight of the distinctiveness of the cooperative *movement* although they did adhere to the mechanics of a cooperative *structure* (Dodaro and Pluta, 2012). The long-understood tendency of worker cooperative degeneration once they take on too much hired-labour is another, although contested, example of potential cooperative degeneration (Webb and Webb, 1920; Ben-Ner, 1984; Rosner, 1985; Dow, 2003). And throughout the US hinterland, Canada's Prairie provinces, and Argentina's agricultural sector, some producer and energy cooperatives, the backbone of rural economic development and local solidarity amongst farmers and small towns in these three countries, have lost many of their initial cooperative values and given in to bureaucratic centralization, market interests, and even demutualization (Craig, 1993; Fernández Besada, 2002; Battilani and Schröter, 2011; Fulton et al., 2015).

However, the possibility of cooperative degeneration must be considered in context. Cooperatives are more than just a legal structure. Indeed, Nokovic (2008) has stressed that it is the cooperative

principles rather than the ownership model that is key in understanding cooperatives. In order to have a broader community impact, then, cooperatives must be engaged in something larger than the internal functioning of the organization. On the other hand, the cooperative form *is* an organizational tool, too. But in order for that tool to have a social purpose it must be attached to a wider social vision or movement (Spear, 2010). The potential to unlock cooperatives' transformational impacts on communities necessitates that they be grounded in broader issues of socio-economic justice and alternative visions of socio-economic organization. Many of the most successful and long-lasting cooperatives, for instance the Basque's Mondragon, the cooperative banks of Trentino, Quebec's Desjardins *caisse populaire*, Kerala's agricultural and weavers' co-ops, and Argentina's Hogar Obrero, have had long-lasting and positive impacts on local communities specifically because they have been rooted in broader visions of social justice and community development.

What we would like to underscore is that "community" itself is a key cooperative principle, not only in terms of community development, but also in the broader perspective on cooperatives as presenting an alternative socio-economic reality. As MacPherson (2012) has argued, "concern for community" has historically been an important and central aspect of cooperativism, and was rightly—and finally—entrenched as the seventh cooperative principle in 1995. Indeed, since cooperatives first appeared as formal organizations in the mid 1800s, community has animated much of the most progressive moments in the cooperative movement.

In the context of this special issue, we argue that community development is not simply one possible objective to which the cooperative tool can be applied, but rather it is a defining objective and strength of the cooperative movement. Co-ops become effective tools for community development when they are linked to a broader social and political imagination of alternative development in conjunction with adequate policies and support mechanisms. This is a point particularly stressed by Sonja Nokovic and Tea Golja in this issue.

Community purpose as a key principle of cooperativism, however, exists in relation to other cooperative principles. The paper by Alicia Lake and Catherine Leviten-Reid illustrates how community purpose can come into tension with other cooperative principles and even with different scalar understandings of community. Their paper explores how the desire of local consumer cooperatives in Cape Breton, Canada to source locally produced agricultural products is placing local consumer cooperative stores in tension with the federated network from which they receive the bulk of their supply. They report significant potential for cooperative stores to link up with new movements of local food production. This, however, represents a shift away from the traditional function of supplying conventional foodstuffs in the context of market failure. This new goal for local cooperatives, moreover, creates tensions with larger federated distribution networks that, on

one hand, wish to support local producers but, on the other hand, lose business when they do[2].

Another example of the tensions between the community principle and the other cooperative principles in practice comes to the fore in Marika Morris's paper. Morris reports on a six-year study of a housing cooperative in Ottawa, Canada where she shows how the co-op was able to build a sense of community for most of its members. However, she also concludes that community building is difficult, tensions exist between diverse groups within the co-op, and that policies set up to support housing co-ops in Canada often hinder their actual community development potential and can even run against the co-op principles. There are thus limits, Morris underscores, to the functional ability of the co-op to support members most in need. Hence, her paper suggests, cooperatives can only take care of certain social ills and marginalization accentuated by capitalistic economic systems. In short, while cooperatives can play a role in community development, we can question whether a strict focus on an economic organizational form (whether cooperative or conventional) is the best way to conceptualize building the capacity of those most marginalized individuals. Implicitly, Morris suggests that co-ops, while ideally situated for such capacity-building assistance, must also be complemented by adequate policies and educational opportunities.

Jorge Sousa's paper also examines the role of community development in a housing cooperative—this time in Toronto, Canada—but puts the focus on community ownership and control. Sousa argues that the Atkinson Housing Co-operative, a complex of 410 residential units covering several apartment buildings and townhouses that was converted from public to co-op housing (Canada's first such conversion), demonstrates community control as a manifestation of the cooperative advantage. The cooperative form was, here, used as an explicit and purposeful tool for community development. However, the experience showed that just as much as the cooperative form could be used as a tool for community development, the successful conversion to the cooperative form required antecedent community development and social justice impetus. In the case of the Atkinson Housing Co-op, community development, in the form of education, capacity building and community policing was required in order to establish the cooperative and allow it to thrive.

Andrés Ruggeri and Marcelo Vieta's paper also presents cooperatives as the transitional outcomes of a wider transformational process. Here cooperatives were selected—both pragmatically and purposefully by the worker-protagonists of the *empresas recuperadas por sus trabajadores* (ERTs) of Argentina—as the organizational form best suited to the movement of worker-led factory and business recuperations in the context of a crisis and post-crisis Argentina. Ruggeri and Vieta argue that there have been three different waves, or "eras", of recuperated enterprises in Argentina: crisis, post-crisis and contemporary ERTs. Here again we see the cooperative form being used as part

[2] It should be noted that the regional co-op federation that was supplying the local cooperative stores sold its grocery division to a large private sector firm during the editing process of this special issue. The local cooperative stores may now be facing entirely new pressures with respect to local sourcing in Cape Breton as they establish contracts with a new wholesale distributor.

of a wider social movement for radical socio-economic change—this time intimately connected to a national context of working-class history and the labour movement. Emerging at first out of the crisis of neoliberalism in Argentina during the years spanning the turn of the millennium, cooperatives were the best fit with the social and solidarity principles of the wider social movements of the time, which eventually would garner institutionalized support for ERTs in Argentinian law. One of the more interesting points that Ruggeri and Vieta raise, then, is the intersection between social movements, policy and political-economic inertia. In their paper, cooperatives were seized upon as the most appropriate form for organizing collective ownership of reclaimed and revived factories and businesses. And while the potential for the worker-ownership process seemed to win some policy support in terms of new bankruptcy laws, the evidence shows that those laws have, due to unfavourable hearings from some judges, served to hinder rather than help new business conversions to co-ops. Despite these challenges, Argentina's ERTs, they conclude, remain robust and promising examples of how cooperatives can and are being used for saving and sustaining jobs and local economies during times of macro and microeconomic crises.

In the ERT movement outlined in Ruggeri and Vieta's work and the housing co-op detailed by Sousa's paper, we explicitly see the reciprocal relationships between cooperatives and the communities in which they exist. The wider social and community purpose of cooperatives can serve to unlock this valuable asset (also see Jones and Kalmi, 2013). From the community's perspective, cooperatives can represent a mechanism to, for example, preserve needed jobs and industry within their localities, or secure affordable and dignified housing for its most vulnerable people. In the case of Ruggeri and Vieta's paper, ERTs' ability to survive the prolonged periods of legal limbo and eviction attempts by former owners and at times the state largely stems from the support and legitimacy they receive from the wider community. In Sousa's paper, residents' early cohesion and common purpose in securing dignified housing and self-determination for themselves reaches similar goals. The lesson here is that the cooperative form of enterprise, because of their community purpose and attachment to a larger, progressive, socio-economic vision, can engender more community engagement and support when compared to traditional investor-owned firms. In both cases, it is the community that asserts and defends the cooperative members' moral legitimacy over the recuperated assets. A similar spirit, but with another set of tensions, can be witnessed in community-owned and cooperatively managed energy sector cooperatives.

Mümtaz Derya Tarhan's article provides a literature review of renewable energy co-operatives (RE co-ops) and their strong connections to community development. As Tarhan demonstrates, RE co-ops offer a powerful nexus between a compelling global movement in sustainable energy (perhaps the defining issue of our times) and local geographic and interest-based communities. Tarhan finds that RE co-ops have great potential for positive socio-economic impacts at the community level—keeping revenue local, generating employment and new business opportunities, and so on. They also have positive impacts with regards to the environment and lowering global carbon emissions. Further, the cooperative form allows for greater acceptance of renewable energy

installations at the local level as community ownership often dispels or reduces the not-in-my-backyard (NIMBY) phenomenon. As we see with the other articles in this issue, the process of developing RE co-ops itself can also have positive impacts in empowering communities to build local capacity. Moreover, the process of creating RE co-ops can assist in overcoming one of the main hurdles to their development—community trust via the experience of working together.

Ushnish Sengupta provides an important counterfactual—and reminder—to this special issue's theme. In the context of Canadian Indigenous communities, Sengupta argues that cooperatives were historically state-sanctioned tools of securing land for European settlers and thus also central to the project of colonization. While having also proven to be promising vehicles for the self-determination of Indigenous peoples, co-ops nevertheless continue to imbue this problematic history. Initially, cooperatives were used as tools to settle migrant populations and assert Canadian sovereignty over Indigenous people's lands. It is therefore not surprising that Canada's Indigenous communities' response to cooperatives has often been resistance. In these cases we can see how the larger socio-economic vision to which cooperatives are employed can equally serve a negative process of community destruction rather than development, particularly when imposed by powers external to the community. And while, as Sengupta shows, cooperatives have been taken up by some Indigenous communities as viable mechanisms from which to practice Indigenous entrepreneurship—rooted in quadruple bottom-line practices that include culture in the mix—they continue to be controversial tools for some of Canada's First Nations, Metis, and Inuit peoples. This is a poignant reminder that the cooperative form is (just?) a tool that, while privileging values of mutual aid, self-determination, and community, can also be deployed for other means and ends that may uphold exclusionary power hierarchies and unjust economic structures. As such, considering issues of *how* and *why* cooperatives are to be used, and by *whom*, are vitally important for adequately optimizing the cooperative advantage and their potentially positive social impacts.

Finally, Sonja Nokovic and Tea Golja's article equally acknowledges the dual potential of cooperatives as tools for progressive community development rooted in social justice issues or, equally, of the neo-liberal status quo. In other words, co-ops may also be employed within a redistributionist economic model that ultimately upholds the capitalistic framework rather than one connected to an alternative social-economic project. Might this be a possible trap for cooperatives? In the context of post-civil war Croatia, Nokovic and Golja argue that cooperatives can indeed potentially be an important component for the broader European project of an expanding social economy. They may, and do at times, also emerge as supports to neo-liberal attempts of downloading state provision to communities. For Nokovic and Golja, the key for Croatian cooperatives, in the context of the continued transitioning process of its economy from the former Yugoslavia's particular brand of socialism to a mixed-model developmental economy, is for its disparate and disjointed cooperative sector to organize and see itself as a *movement*. The success of cooperative movements in other places and conjunctures, we believe, leaves hopeful openings for an alternative path to Croatia's future development beyond the problematic offerings of neo-liberalism.

Our fundamental argument in this introduction to the special issue of JEOD, "The Cooperative Advantage for Community Development", is that cooperatives are most effective when they are both connected to larger social-justice movements and when simultaneously rooted securely to local communities. Such "glocalized" (Swyngedouw, 1997) ways of thinking about (and practicing) cooperation unleashes the potential of the cooperative model. Local community impact is enhanced and improved as cooperatives connect to wider socio-economic movements for alternative economies. The papers in this edition serve as examples of how this can be achieved (Ruggeri and Vieta, Sousa, Tarhan), how there can be tensions between the local and larger socio-economic contexts and visions (Lake and Leviten-Reid, Morris) and that a potential trap for cooperatives might exist when the larger projects within which they are embedded are colonialism (Sengupta) and neo-liberalism (Nokovic and Golia). But even the last two papers of the special issue allude to the cooperative form's equal potential to move beyond these traps if rooted in local needs, practices, assets, cultural sensitivities, and supportive policies.

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