

Cooperatives and the ICA-EU Partnership: Bridging the Gap Between Youth and the Cooperative Movement with Practitioner Thematic Research on Youth



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ABSTRACT

With an aim to consult and include the views of young people and considering the crucial role that youth and cooperatives can play for inclusive growth and sustainable development, a thematic research on how cooperatives can support young people is currently being led within the ICA-EU partnership for development, conducted in a harmonised way by all ICA offices with a common methodology. The Youth research aims to provide insights on which key challenges youth are facing; if and how cooperatives can help to address them; how cooperatives can reinforce their support to young people; and which specific mechanisms, capacity-building initiatives and targeted actions can empower young cooperators. This Paper outlines the central elements of this research, including key ways in which cooperatives may contribute to empower young people, as well as recommendations as to how this support can be improved.

The expected output of this research is a global report, featuring a detailed snapshot and analysis of the diverse challenges and opportunities facing young people around the world. Regional results will help to identify wider global trends, to be captured in the final report. The survey results and data will be combined and organised around a number of themes, such as employment, entrepreneurship, or gender, supplemented with the secondary literature review.

This research will be a useful resource for key cooperative stakeholders including decision-makers and young cooperators. This can help to bridge the gap toward the cooperative movement and demonstrate the benefits of the cooperative model for those less familiar with its potential. Conclusions, including recommendations, will help to identify good practices and supporting tools, strengthening links between youth and the cooperative movement.

KEYWORDS: *youth; challenges; networks; support; cooperatives; cooperative entrepreneurship; sustainable development;*

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Background

Created in 1895, the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) is the global representative organisation of cooperative enterprises across all sectors, currently counting 308 members from 109 countries (May 2019). The ICA unites a very large part of today's cooperative development activities under its umbrella through the work of its national member federations active in development implementation and through the coordination work undertaken at the regional level by its regional offices – i.e. Cooperatives Europe, Cooperatives of the Americas, ICA-Africa and ICA Asia-Pacific. The ICA has grown into an important global organisation promoting the cooperative model around the world, having been recognised by the United Nations (UN) since the 1940s.¹ This current research falls within the scope of the knowledge building activities undertaken within the partnership for international development signed between the International Co-operative Alliance and the European Commission in 2016, to strengthen the cooperative movement and its capacity to promote international development worldwide, with a number of activities based on advocacy, visibility, capacity building, and research. Under this partnership, the ICA is carrying out a number of global research activities, which includes a global thematic research on youth, featured within this Paper. The research aims to provide insights on which key challenges youth are facing; if and how cooperatives can help to address them, and how the engagement and the channels of communication between cooperatives and youth might be improved. Therefore, the Paper first discusses the contextual background of the research and outlines the objectives and main features of the work, including the methodological instruments used, before addressing the theoretical basis and the existing literature on youth and the cooperative movement. It concludes with a discussion of recent key findings and a glimpse of the next steps, providing the reader with a detailed overview of the research forthwith.

Regarding the background of the research, the consistent development of new knowledge on a number of thematic trends on cooperatives is a strategic priority of the ICA, one which has been highlighted by cooperative members. At the same time, within the ICA-EU Partnership, thematic research is undertaken by the ICA regional offices on themes of growing relevance to members, cooperative scholars and stakeholders. When identifying youth as a key focus for future research in the regions of Africa, the Americas, Europe and Asia-Pacific, it became clear that the topic proves a common theme consistently relevant to all ICA offices and their members. The preliminary analysis undertaken throughout this research demonstrated the presence of wide-ranging commonalities across regions, both on the challenges and correspondent opportunities with regard to youth and cooperative development, making it an ideal subject for a research of global scope. The research was therefore decided and designed jointly by all ICA offices, including ICA global, Cooperatives Europe, ICA-Africa, Cooperatives of the Americas, and ICA Asia-Pacific, with its implementation to be conducted at a decentralised level by each regional office.

It is also important to note that a practitioner's approach was used for the research. This means that the research team along with their respective offices intend to complement scholarly work on the topic of youth and cooperatives with an operational mandate linked to policy and advocacy activities. The role of a global cooperative apex organisation, which can be well placed as a source of knowledge distribution and networking, can help in linking together different components of the cooperative movement focused on youth, whilst reaching out to external partners outside of the cooperative family, such as civil society organisations, local authorities, and youth organisations.

1 Schaffer, J. (1999). [Historical Dictionary of the Cooperative Movement](#), Scarecrow Press, London, pg. 396.

Therefore, the research is intended to represent a useful resource for key cooperative stakeholders including decision-makers and young cooperators, but also for interested persons outside the cooperative movement. By bridging the gap towards non cooperators and reaching out to diverse external stakeholders, we hope to demonstrate the benefits of the cooperative model for those less familiar with its potential.

It should also be noted that two further overarching political frameworks are prevalent in the approach selected. The first is the ICA-EU Partnership's mandate, rooted in raising the profile of cooperatives as a major actor in international development. The development of young people, of their skills and capabilities to live fulfilling and purposeful lives, fits well within such a mandate, particularly with regard to the global focus of the research, and when considering that, according to the United Nations, close to 90 per cent today's young people are living in developing countries, where they make up a large proportion of the population.² The second overarching framework is the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) and Agenda 2030, which is relevant to situate the present research within a number of thematic and strategic priorities, notably on decent work and gender, among other key priorities. Although there is no specific SDG specifically committed to young people, accepting that cooperatives already have an important role to play in sustainable development means that these two frameworks are naturally interlinked with the topic of youth. It is a core argument of this Paper that cooperatives and cooperative entrepreneurship have an important role to play in this regard, which can also be further enhanced through a number of ways, given the current challenges that youth are facing, elaborated below.

Context

It is already largely documented that young people are facing a number of complex challenges today which have large impacts on both themselves and on wider society, yet it remains important to document them briefly here. When looking at the existing documentation on the topic across all ICA regions, unemployment and underemployment were repeatedly identified as major challenges.³ The dilemma is encapsulated by the infamous circular example of the 'experience trap', within which a young person must acquire existing experience to find employment, yet without any experience at the outset, is unable to find a job. For those that are able to find work, they may suffer from working poverty or poor working conditions, including low pay and low productivity.⁴

Compounded by economic shifts, notably austerity politics and policy interventions in financialised liberal market economies in recent years, the labour market suffers from increased volatility.⁵ For young people, a declining relative value in tertiary education has emerged as a result of underemployment, worsened by a large skills gap between the needs of employers and youth's qualifications. For those without a tertiary education, these effects are felt in the increasing proportion of graduates who compete for non-graduate jobs. Further, increased demographic changes, such as an expanding youth population or a higher distribution of young people in the general population, can cause high competition for work in urban areas. In rural areas, a distinct lack of opportunity for youth persists,

² Further information on the links between Youth and the SDGs can be found [here](#). This statistic is also held by UNICEF (2012) which states that nearly 90 per cent of adolescents live in developing countries. See United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) (2012). Progress for Children A report card on adolescents, *Number 10*, April 2012.

³ [International Cooperative Youth Statement 2012](#), Presented at the United Nations during the Closing Ceremonies of the International Year of Cooperatives, November 20, 2012

⁴ ILO (2012) [A better future for young people: What cooperatives can offer](#), Information Note

⁵ A [manifesto](#) from the Young Leaders Cooperative Summit in 2014 makes a distinct reference to the youth cooperative movement as an anti-capitalist and anti-neoliberal movement.

which can encourage out migration and a corresponding slowing of economic activity.⁶ With a high competition for jobs, young people can experience reduced access to land, a lack of quality education or vocational training, restricted access to credit or services, a lack of financial resources. In some countries and regions, a lack of access to digital services and the internet also hinders opportunities to find employment.⁷

In addition, a number of macro-societal issues also stood out, such as general social and political instability, as well as crime and exploitation, including the risks of radicalisation and even militarisation in countries where conventional livelihoods are severely impeded or in countries affected by conflict.⁸ Worldwide, it is clear that youth experience social exclusion and discrimination, including on issues surrounding governance and public policy. A lack of social capital or the existence of intergenerational inequalities mean that the ability of youth to shape the consensus or the policy responses to these wider issues, and more importantly, the issues directly affecting them, is hindered or prevented.⁹

When discussing the challenges facing young people, it is also manifest that young women are at a greater disadvantage than young men. In particular, the literature demonstrates that higher proportions of women are NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training), up to 75% in a number of countries, for instance in the Americas region.¹⁰ This makes the inclusion of gender as a thematic lens of analysis an important priority when conceptualising the challenges of young people. When considered overall, these pressures on young people result in a great sense of disempowerment and disengagement with and from societies and communities at large.

The key highlight of this discussion on challenges is that it sets a particular contextual background and a research question through which to view the role of cooperatives, which the rest of this Paper aims to disentangle. The research investigates how cooperatives might be able to tackle these challenges and alleviate the disengagement and disempowerment noted above, both through the assets of the cooperative model to face the changing world of work, but also through the cooperative movement's ability to improve channels of communication and engagement with young people. Improved knowledge on the successful way to foster engagement between youth and cooperatives is an important route to better include young people in decision-making, and further raise their profile within the cooperative movement itself. The strategy for achieving this goal is broken down into three interrelated objectives, which are outlined in the following section.

6 FAO (2012) Youth: the future of agricultural cooperatives, Briefing Paper.

7 A good overview of technological shifts within the labour market can be found in Terassi, E. (2018) [Global Study on Youth Cooperative Entrepreneurship](#), CICOPA.

8 See Africa Renewal, '[Youth dividend or ticking time bomb?](#)' *Special Edition on Youth*, 2017.

9 For a good overview of further challenges, see ILO (2015). [Cooperatives and the World of Work No. 4: Rediscovering cooperatives: young people finding work the cooperative way](#), ILO COOP Cooperatives and the World of Work series.

10 OCDE/CEPAL/CAF (2016). [Perspectivas económicas de América Latina 2017: Juventud, competencias y emprendimiento](#), OECD Publishing, Paris.

OBJECTIVES

With this wide set of challenges and background context as a firm starting basis, the global youth research has a number of primary interrelated objectives and concentrates on a few core focus areas, such as challenges, knowledge, engagement, and successful cases studies. Together, each of these main focus areas aim to produce actionable conclusions and recommendations that can feed into to global, regional and local policy and advocacy activities, as well as to build on existing knowledge generated on the topic of youth.¹¹

The first objective that the youth research aims to meet is to provide clear insights on which key challenges youth are facing, from the perspective of youth themselves. In addition, it attempts to move a step further to provide action-based recommendations and solutions, focusing on if and how cooperatives can help to address those issues. These solutions and recommendations take a number of different angles. The ambition is that through increasing knowledge of the reality for young people in the surveyed countries, cooperatives and their representative organisations can provide higher quality assistance to their young members on the issues affecting them most, for instance on the topics of decent work and employment, political representation and youth orientated governance, or education and training.

Secondly, and building upon the first objective to identify the challenges and solutions, the research also aims to improve cooperatives' support to young people. The research therefore aims to isolate the ways in which the cooperative movement can better support and engage with young people, and vice versa. That is to say, in improving the engagement between young people and cooperatives, and in improving the level of support that cooperatives can offer young people through various ways (technical and operational aspects, relationships with stakeholders and networks, but also through governance) the research investigates how the interactions between cooperatives and youth can be strengthened. By taking into direct consideration the ideas and input of young people on these issues, and analysing the potential role of cooperatives to tackle them, it hopes to shed further light on how potential obstacles can be reduced.

Thirdly, the research aims to provide a number of key conclusions and recommendations that can feed into global policy, advocacy, and other operational activities. It should also be noted, that as a practitioner research, the work carried out on youth is designed to have a practical application to other activities within the ICA-EU Partnership. One notable example is the ongoing and longstanding actions taken within the Partnership on youth empowerment, supported by diverse partners including the ICA Youth network. Benefitting from outcomes of the ICA-EU partnership activities in view of cross cutting development priorities on youth, the topic has gained considerable visibility from this recent work. In the last years, a wealth of youth initiatives has been carried around the world within the cooperative movement. Networks of young cooperators have been active in different ICA regions, developing tools and implementing projects aiming to address emerging needs and aspirations expressed by new generations of cooperators.¹²

Looking closer at practitioner activities, the topic of cooperative entrepreneurship has taken centre stage with further activities such as the planning of a Global Youth Forum, which aims to bring together young entrepreneurs and professionals from around the world to take part in training sessions to improve their skills and knowledge. Another activity under the ICA-EU Partnership of a close relation includes the launch of the new Global Cooperative Entrepreneurs programme (GCE), inspired by Cooperatives Europe's CoopStarter 2.0 Erasmus+ funded project.¹³

¹¹ Further information on ICA Youth Activities is available at <https://www.ica.coop/en/youth-network>

¹² CJDES & Cooperatives Europe (2016). Youth for #Coop, *Cooperating Beyond Borders*, Brussels.

¹³ For more information on the Global Cooperative Entrepreneurs programme see here: <https://www.ica.coop/en/newsroom/news/global-cooperative-entrepreneurs-gce-kicks-support-youth-cooperative-entrepreneurship>

This initiative aims to support the creation of mentorship programmes to help young people in their actions on youth cooperative entrepreneurship, in a number of countries around the world. For further practical applications and concrete ideas on how the cooperative model can be utilised in such contexts, the research is also designed to include case studies organised around a number of thematic areas relevant for the cooperative movement, to provide practical examples for young cooperators and other interested stakeholders.

With these three objectives achieved, this study will be able to contribute to addressing knowledge gaps within the context previously identified, doing so by employing a harmonised methodological process in all ICA regions, as elaborated below.

METHODOLOGY

The Global Youth Thematic research is focused on both primary and secondary research methods, as well as quantitative and qualitative analysis. A mixed methods approach allows a more nuanced framework for analysis, with the opportunity to make comparative observations on regional results, which can in turn identify wider global trends regarding cooperatives and young people. Therefore, the research was conducted in two main stages; first through a period of secondary research on the existing literature, conducted simultaneously with the development of harmonised methodological tools, and secondly through a period of primary data collection. Following these two main stages, the process is currently embarking on data analysis and the production of cross-regional and national results. The expected output of this research process is a final global report, featuring a detailed snapshot and analysis of the diverse challenges and opportunities facing young people around the world. In order to structure the report, the survey results and data will be combined and organised around a number of themes, such as employment, entrepreneurship, or gender.

During the first stage, i.e. prior to the data collection, a comprehensive literature review was conducted, in order to build upon existing contributions. The results of this literature review, discussed further below, provided a solid foundational basis to identify the challenges, possible solutions, and overarching themes relevant for the research. In addition, in order to identify a suitable target group, the development of respondents' selection criteria aimed to guide the selection of young people surveyed. This group includes key stakeholders, such as students, young professionals, youth leaders, and young representatives of cooperative organisations, among other key stakeholders. The scope of our research therefore encompassed two main groups: respondents within the cooperative movement and respondents outside of it. The primary reason to settle upon such main groups was to provide further insights into how the cooperative movement can better support young people, including youth with less or little familiarity with the benefits of the cooperative model. The research uses the age range of 18-35 years old as a definition of youth, a range used by the ICA Youth Network, and commonly accepted in a number of studies and countries.¹⁴ An extended definition beyond the existing 18-24 range (the UN and ILO standard, among others) allows the research to capture a more realistic definition of global and regional differences between countries surveyed, of transitions from education to work, alongside the development and incubation of cooperative enterprises by young entrepreneurs.

One of the most important methodological concerns was that each of the aforementioned objectives and the research process was to be developed and carried out in a harmonised way, with a common methodology co-constructed in a horizontal manner and implemented by all the ICA offices. This increases the ownership and visibility of the process across all regions, mirrors the value of cooperation

¹⁴ See the ICA Youth Network [Constitution](#), Article III on Membership, or for example, see the broader definition given in the African Union's [African Youth Charter](#) where "youth" means "every person between the ages of 15 and 35 years", pg.3.

and allows all regions to offer real input and expertise. In order to carry out successful knowledge-building activities that can be relevant to ICA members and cooperative stakeholders at local level, the majority of the ICA research activities are carried out in a decentralised way by the ICA regional offices, with coordinated support from the global level.

With this approach, two common surveys for data collection were produced in a harmonised manner by the ICA offices, set up in an online format and translated into the three ICA languages (English, Spanish, and French). Following the definition of the surveys - addressing aspects such as challenges faced, relevant actors to tackle these challenges, knowledge of the cooperative movement, youth cooperative membership, preferred methods of engagement, interesting case studies of youth cooperative entrepreneurship, among other key questions - the surveys were disseminated in a decentralised manner by each ICA regional office, targeting respondents both within and outside the cooperative movement. In each region, five to six countries were surveyed. For the diffusion of the surveys, the ICA regional offices utilised channels of diffusion with member and partner organisations, to reach relevant youth networks and cooperative youth in the different countries surveyed. These intermediary network structures and the key contacts who supported the diffusion acted as an effective relay of information between young people and the wider global cooperative movement of which they are a part.

The surveys include both nominal data and qualitative answers to questions, providing a depth of analysis not available through quantitative indicators alone. Following this, qualitative and quantitative data is to be analysed with a harmonised process in each ICA regional office. The initial interpretative analysis is discussed within the latter part of this Paper.

In regard to challenges faced during the research, it is expected that several difficulties can occur at various points during such an exercise, both operational challenges and those relative to the content and analysis. The careful planning phase of the research provides an opportunity for these issues to be addressed and to feed the knowledge acquired into the latter stages of the research process. During the planning phases, a number of key success factors were identified, such as clear and precise definitions for the questionnaire, the horizontal and harmonised methodological process, and the criteria for informed youth respondents. As each research is a learning process, the outcomes of this research will help inform the future global thematic research activities under the ICA-EU Partnership, foreseen to be on other global topics of relevance for cooperative stakeholders, as well as ICA member organisations and regional offices.

A solid methodological approach helps to produce reliable results relevant for young people both within and outside of the cooperative movement. In order to outline the theoretical underpinnings of the research in further detail, the next section discusses the core of how cooperatives can better support youth, drawing on a number of contextual challenges previously identified in the literature review.

HIGHLIGHTS FROM SECONDARY RESEARCH ON COOPERATIVES AND YOUTH

As previously established, young people are currently suffering from a number of persistent and interlinked challenges. Therefore, what makes cooperatives of particular relevance to these challenges? Going beyond this, what in particular could the cooperative model be able to offer, that can be empirically documented with further research? This section addresses the theoretical linkages between cooperatives and youth, followed by a particular focus upon the existing literature and arguments surrounding the different categories identified, including engagement and participation, as well as solutions and opportunities for young people, and how this could be further improved.

Cooperative Values and Principles

The theoretical linkages between the cooperative values and principles and the topic of youth provide the initial hint to the relevance of the cooperative model to address such persistent challenges. At first glance, at the very root is the definition provided by the International Co-operative Alliance, which defines a cooperative as *'an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise'*.¹⁵ A key, implicit component is that cooperatives can meet specific and evolving needs, applicable to the composition of their members. Whilst not specifically alluding to youth in this case, the people-centered approach of cooperatives makes it well suited to meeting the evolving needs of young people, particularly within a fast moving and changing world of work.¹⁶ In regard to the formation and joining of cooperatives, voluntary and open membership, a key cooperative principle, ensures that young people are not prohibited from joining a cooperative. The democratic and horizontal nature of cooperative governance, operative through the 'one-member one-vote' principle, ensures that young members of cooperatives can further influence the governance of the cooperative.

In addition, young people have a further specific mention within Cooperative Principle 5 on Education, Training and Information, which states that cooperatives *'inform the general public - particularly young people and opinion leaders - about the nature and benefits of co-operation'*.¹⁷ Going beyond simply the reiteration of benefits, this is about the empowerment and capacity building of members. If cooperation requires autonomy, it proves crucial for a cooperative to empower its members, and work on the basis of power-with rather than power-over its members.¹⁸ Further, the participation of youth among cooperatives in decision making processes is reflected by cooperative values such as democracy and principles such as autonomy and concern for community. The cooperative principle of 'Concern for community' is clearly relevant as it suggests that cooperatives have a tangible relation to the communities within which they are based, both in the present and in the future.¹⁹ Not only do cooperatives arise from meeting genuine needs, but surplus and benefits stay within and are reinvested by the community. This benefits the youth who form part of these communities, for as future adults, an emphasis on the sustainable development of communities for the longer term proves particularly important.

Going beyond these immediate theoretical relations, a number of existing studies have already conducted across different regions with a focus on cooperatives and young people, covering important themes such as cooperative entrepreneurship and gender, and looking at the various ways in which cooperatives may support and alleviate challenges for young people. The discussion within the existing literature is analysed below, looking at the key themes of participation; opportunities and benefits; as well as solutions and improvements.

¹⁵ See The Statement on the Cooperative Identity, available here <https://www.ica.coop/en/cooperatives/cooperative-identity>

¹⁶ CJDES & Cooperatives Europe (2016).

¹⁷ See the ICA's Principle 5 here <https://www.ica.coop/en/cooperatives/cooperative-identity#education-training-and-information>

¹⁸ Michael Johnson (2012). The Cooperative Principles, the Common Good, and Solidarity. Grassroots Economic Organizing (GEO) Newsletter, Volume 2, Issue 12. <http://geo.coop/>

¹⁹ Hoyt, A. (1996). *And then there were seven: Cooperative Principles Updated*, Cooperative Grocer, University of Wisconsin Center for Cooperatives.

Challenges and Obstacles

One key area of analysis consists in examining the challenges and obstacles to youth participation within cooperatives. When considering the theoretical perspective just discussed, as well as the principles of democratic member participation and voluntary open membership, it could be expected that cooperatives can ensure the increased participation of young people or greater youth involvement, leading to a corresponding increase in youth-centred governance or perhaps a greater awareness of the benefits of cooperation among young people. However, the initial secondary research demonstrated that there were a number of reasons why *this was not necessarily the case*. For example, many studies cite that *perceptions* of cooperatives are a central barrier. This refers to both perceptions of young people toward cooperatives, but also a lack of active engagement from cooperatives toward youth, such as in inclusion and governance matters, as well as a lack of flexibility and adaptability to introduce youth friendly structures.²⁰

In regard to the perceptions of youth, the literature suggests that the cooperative model may hold negative connotations for them, such as corruption or state collusion, an old or outdated model, a model which is not profitable, or generally unattractive to young people who have ambitious plans and ideas for enterprises and activities.²¹ In addition, the studies analysed identified a lack of knowledge on the cooperative model, including on its specific benefits and unique features, for instance, on the knowledge of the cooperative values and principles as safeguarded by the ICA.²² This is an issue which is also replicated in the lack of a cooperative presence on national education curricula in many countries, as other studies have suggested, including from the ILO.²³ A major gap seems to exist in this regard, considering that the cooperative model receives scant attention in the university disciplines of business and economics compared to the stock company or for-profit shareholder corporation, despite its numerous benefits, for example as a resilient model to economic crisis, a form of self-help, or a tool to redress 'market failures' in meeting previously unmet needs.²⁴

In addition to noting insufficient education on cooperatives, the literature highlighted a possible uncertainty over the place of cooperatives within the wider social economy model by young people, which can also cause confusion.²⁵ This also confirms the need for the cooperative identity to be distinctly outlined and clearly iterated. Within the wider context of social economy, many changes and innovations are taking place across various sectors and in different regions. New models of collaboration and shifting technological trends have prompted alternative models of organising and experimental enterprises to develop in the social and solidarity economy, in which cooperatives and the cooperative movement are playing an important role. In this context, young people could benefit from having greater knowledge of the unique features of the cooperative model. Ensuring the preservation of the renowned economic and social advantages of the cooperative model, balanced with its ability in protecting livelihoods, becomes particularly relevant in a globalised world with increasing social, economic and environmental challenges. Cooperatives are also contributing to the Agenda 2030 and the SDGs, through which sharing the benefits of globalisation and reducing inequality and perpetual economic growth have become increasingly salient issues. Although more work is needed on clearly locating the cooperative model in relation the wider social economy, to two should not be viewed as acting in opposition, but rather as acting in compliment to one another when responding to such challenges.

²⁰ CJDES & Cooperatives Europe (2016).

²¹ Ibid. (2016).

²² For example, see R.M. Mwangi (2017). Youth Engagement with Co-operatives in Kenya, Research Paper, KCA University.

²³ ILO (2015). [Cooperatives and the World of Work No. 4: Rediscovering cooperatives: young people finding work the cooperative way](#), ILO COOP Cooperatives and the World of Work series.

²⁴ Ger J.H. van der Sangen, 'How to Regulate Cooperatives in the EU?', *The Dovenschmidt Quarterly*, 2014, pp. 131-146.

²⁵ CJDES & Cooperatives Europe (2016).

Moreover, the literature reviewed highlighted how the main challenges faced by cooperatives in a general sense, such as raising capital, competition with for-profit enterprises, access to markets, regulation for a level playing field, and others, remain present and are perhaps amplified for young cooperative members or cooperatives run by youth.²⁶ Further, a lack of resources, technical support or information and knowledge sharing, as well as isolation from cooperative networks and support structures, can exacerbate issues.²⁷ A range of governance issues, such as ensuring the adequate inclusion of youth, as well as efficient dialogue mechanisms between and among youth and other cooperative members, can also pose challenges in the internal management and development of cooperatives.

Even before this stage, barriers persist for youth entry within cooperatives, such as the provision of a minimum share capital, which also epitomise the wider generational issues at play, notably a lack of participation and representation, but also general perceptions of young people. For example, one source suggested that youth in cooperatives face vertical mobility and representation barriers, with older generations perceiving young people as competition, or as lacking in commitment.²⁸ In finding common ground between the different views of members, it is also important to acknowledge that whilst youth leadership needs to be actively fostered, such mechanisms for participation must co-exist alongside the equality and solidarity shown to all members within a cooperative, in line with the cooperative values and principles.

Opportunities and Benefits

However, despite the significant difficulties documented, the literature offered further insight on the opportunities that youth can bring to enterprises, created both by youth themselves, and by cooperatives. Each of these dynamics will be discussed here.

Young people bring a much-needed boost of energy and dynamism into cooperative enterprises and conventional businesses, including new skills, enhanced creativity and problem solving. A rise in entrepreneurial thinking is also clearly seen when they join.²⁹ Young people can also be significant drivers of innovation, being perhaps less sensitised to traditional working patterns or less afraid than others to take risks and think differently about business problems.³⁰ For example, some of the most innovative work at present is in emerging platform cooperatives, a technologically advanced field of cooperative entrepreneurship which is often developed by young entrepreneurs.³¹ If we accept the ideas of reconceptualising work as organisational innovation³², young people may have an extremely important role to play in driving progressive change at different levels of an enterprise structure.

On the one hand, youth can certainly bring the benefits listed above within cooperatives, as well as strongly impact on cooperative governance, through increased participation and activism. For cooperatives able to implement some horizontal governance mechanisms within their structures,

²⁶ ILO (2015). [Cooperatives and the World of Work No. 4: Rediscovering cooperatives: young people finding work the cooperative way](#), ILO COOP Cooperatives and the World of Work series.

²⁷ European Youth Forum (2014) [Money Grows on Trees: Youth organisations setting up cooperatives](#) Brussels, pg. 12.

²⁸ [International Cooperative Youth Statement 2012](#), Presented at the United Nations during the Closing Ceremonies of the International Year of Cooperatives, November 20, 2012.

²⁹ Hartley, S. (2011). A New Space for a New Generation: The Rise of Co-operatives Amongst Young People in Africa, The Co-operative College, pg.39.

³⁰ European Youth Forum (2016). [Social Inclusion and Young People Excluding Youth: A Threat to Our Future](#). Brussels.

³¹ For further information on platform cooperatives, see CICOPA News, [How can cooperatives in the platform economy shape the future of work?](#) March 2018.

³² See the forthcoming book by Roelants, B. Hyungsik Eum, Simel Esim, Sonja Novkovic, Walteri Katajamäki, [Cooperatives and the World of Work](#), Routledge, 2019.

youth participation can lead to the greater likelihood of youth friendly policies.³³ In addition, many studies pointed to the benefits of partnerships and working together, mirroring the value of cooperation, a collaborative approach to working that can bring direct and indirect benefits to enterprises as well as to wider society, in line with the aforementioned principle of concern for community.³⁴

On the other hand, as this Paper demonstrated that the benefits of the cooperative model for youth is a topic less encountered by young people themselves, it is prudent to recall them here. In the literature surveyed, the potential social and economic benefits of the cooperative model are multiple. It is clear that a central facet of this comes from work and employment, since cooperatives can provide jobs, satisfactory working conditions and new skills to cooperative members.³⁵ As mentioned, the resilience of the cooperative model may be argued to provide additional security of employment. With work and employment identified as potentially the biggest challenges facing young people today, this is clearly a significant strength of the cooperative model. Going further, cooperatives are increasingly recognised as drivers not only of decent work and therefore economic growth, but also sustainable development, due to the presence of democratic and participatory decision making, inclusion of underrepresented or underprivileged groups, and equitable distribution of economic surplus.³⁶

In addition, with reference to social skills and behavioural economics, cooperatives can act as 'schools for democracy', providing a valuable real-world example of democratic and participatory collaboration.³⁷ This helps young people further develop their social skills and confidence through working collaboratively with others within an entrepreneurial approach. At the same time, considering that the original cooperative banking movements came from the perspective of self-help in times of economic hardship, young people facing economic and social challenges may also be further supported in exploring cooperative values of self-help and self-responsibility. At a more practical level, cooperatives can also provide a number of valuable services or products to young people, such as education or vocational training. As cooperatives are designed to meet a diversified set of needs beyond the profit generation of conventional businesses, they often seek to meet a particularly prevalent social, economic or environmental objective, often of relevance and benefit for younger people. The increasing popularity of cooperative supermarkets as an alternative to food conglomerates, or the provision of social support for freelancers such as Smart Coop in Belgium or COOPANAME in France, where freelancers share common services, such as accountancy, legal advice, support for the development of entrepreneurial activities, common work space and utilities, represent two good examples.³⁸ However, the research must also look beyond these benefits if the cooperative movement is to strengthen its responses to the difficulties experienced by youth.

Solutions and Improvements

Noting that the cooperative model can offer many benefits to young people, how could these benefits be improved? Firstly, with regard to young people themselves, the networks for youth within the cooperative movement's structures could be boosted. The main insights from the literature suggested that Youth can benefit from greater participation and communication, increased credibility,

33 FAO (2016). pg. 2.

34 CJDES & Cooperatives Europe (2016).

35 ILO (2015) World of Work No. 4.

36 For more information on the links between cooperatives and the SDGs please visit: <https://www.ica.coop/en/sustainable-development-goals>

37 Atxabal Rada, Alberto (2014). *Democracia y jóvenes, una aproximación desde las cooperativas*. REVESCO. Revista de Estudios Cooperativos (116). pp. 57-76.

38 European Youth Forum (2016).

and a greater degree influence within public policies. Similarly, youth could also be more proactive in maximising the opportunities for potential. There is a need for young people to actively take a role in the organisations that they occupy and shape the responses to problems impacting them, in order to better respond to their needs. It also clear that for leadership within cooperatives, including in management and on boards, significant input from young people is needed, precisely because they can bring the notable benefits set out above.

External actors also have an important part to play, primarily in facilitating the introduction of cooperative friendly policies, youth orientated cooperative policies, and an improved enabling environment and legal framework for cooperatives. Wider youth entrepreneurship and employment programmes introduced by national, supranational or even local governments can include an emphasis on the cooperative model, including its benefits and possible challenges. This is also a particularly crucial point with regards to national curricula and education syllabuses, where cooperative education ought to be better integrated. Cross-sectoral recognition of the cooperative business model by national governments and the introduction of corresponding supportive legislative frameworks, would be very beneficial for cooperative's development and the growth of the movement³⁹, therefore also offering more opportunities to young people.

With regard to partnerships with international organisations, such as the United Nations or national governments, as mentioned, a better level of engagement and proactive dialogue in advocating for a better enabling environment for cooperatives is needed. Further, the strengthening of networks and linkages between cooperatives and other organisations should be further pursued. The ICA-EU Partnership signed between the International Co-operative Alliance and the European Commission has been an innovative progression in this regard, as one primary aim is the strengthening of cooperative networks, and in building partnerships with international organisations. At a practical level, external actors can also better support cooperatives through the provision of technical and financial support. These partnerships can not only support the cooperative movement's ability to offer solutions to young people, but also can facilitate synergies with external, non-cooperative organisations focused on youth.

Following external actors, cooperatives and cooperative representative organisations also have an important role to play in enhancing the participation of young people within their structures. Firstly, they can build upon and enhance the knowledge of youth within their environments, for example, through youth orientated research and mapping exercises, such as the present research conducted under the ICA-EU partnership, or other notable research such as CICOPA's work on youth cooperative entrepreneurship, to name recent initiatives.⁴⁰ In addition to further research, establishing benchmarks and measures for youth engagement in cooperatives alongside indicators of their social and economic development would be a worthwhile topic for further research. Second, at a more practical level, the introduction or improvement of youth orientated governance mechanisms, including through the use of technology, is another high priority. Adapting engagement methods to youth preferences can increase participation and commitment.

At regional level, examples of pooled knowledge through existing networks can also be a source of knowledge transfer to young people. For example, the Cooperatives Europe Development Platform (CEDP), a European network of ten cooperative organisations active in international cooperation from different sectors, may be able to reach out to cooperative youth regarding opportunities offered through international cooperative development, due to its position as a development experts group.⁴¹

39 Karakas, C. (2019). [Cooperatives: Characteristics, activities, status, challenges](#), Briefing, European Parliamentary Research Service, February 2019.

40 Terassi, E. (2018). [Global Study on Youth Cooperative Entrepreneurship](#), CICOPA.

41 For more information on the Cooperatives Europe Development Platform (CEDP) and its projects, please visit <https://coopseurope.coop/development/>

As it seems clear that a persistent lack of knowledge on cooperatives subsists outside of the movement, an enhanced promotion of the cooperative model, its relevance in different contexts, and above all its benefits for youth, would help to address this.

Overall, the review of existing literature demonstrates that there is a firm basis from which to build upon regarding the connections between cooperatives and young people. Although significant challenges for youth involvement persist, significant opportunities exist, and a number of potential solutions already identified can help to alleviate them. To build on these secondary sources, the next section will now review in detail the original primary data collected during the research so far, which helps to confirm existing theoretical ideas on the support provided by cooperatives to young people identified in previous sections.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS FROM PRIMARY RESEARCH

At the time of writing, national and regional data collection is currently ongoing worldwide and will continue to be completed later in the year. This Paper, therefore, is not conclusive in summarising all findings from the research. Findings at the national and regional level will need be contextualised within the regional and global contexts respectively, providing a useful background for critical analysis and comparison. As a result, the present section does not pretend to draw concrete conclusions, but rather to provide a snapshot of the data collected thus far, while more data is to be collected and analysed over the coming months. With these limitations in mind, the following findings were identified at present by the research teams from the different ICA regions.

Cooperatives Europe

In Europe, the first results collected so far provide a brief but valuable insight into the ideas of young people on the challenges and solutions in relation to cooperatives. Preliminary replies were received from Italy, Denmark and Greece, with further results to be obtained from the United Kingdom, France and Bulgaria. From an initial analysis of the results received, which came from both young cooperators and young people outside the cooperative movement, the average age of respondents was somewhat higher than in other ICA regions and included a higher proportion of responses from male than female participants.

First takeaways on the challenges facing young people are firmly in line with the existing literature on the topic, confirming that work, access to employment and jobs represent a considerable challenge for both target groups. In addition, there appeared to also be a growing concern for environmental and sustainability issues, though this was considered most important for young cooperators, rather than those outside of the cooperative movement.

In regard to successfully responding to these issues, for both young cooperators and young people outside of the cooperative movement, educational actors and political actors were deemed the most relevant actors to address the challenges they were facing. Private sector actors had a less relevant ranking. This is an important insight that indeed suggests, as previously discussed within the literature, that further partnerships between the cooperative model and external actors could be beneficial in tackling the difficulties met by young people.

When discussing solutions, many respondents singled out the need for greater active participation and engagement by young people, in politics as well as in their communities. Further, education and training were also highlighted as a key priority to improve skills. The cooperative model was singled out as a good response because of its democratic and social nature, as well as being a model of common

ownership, compared with the shareholder model. Further, democracy was considered the strongest asset of a cooperative in its ability to help youth. This appears to signal a greater awareness on the benefits of democracy than has been previously discussed in the secondary research. Regarding how cooperatives could improve, the figure below gives a brief visual depiction of how cooperatives can better engage with young people in Europe.

Figure 1: A qualitative snapshot of responses in Europe: Do you have any suggestions of how cooperatives can engage more with young people’s challenges and issues?



Graphic produced with free software for word cloud generation at Wordclouds.com

Regarding knowledge, 75% of the people surveyed from outside of the cooperative movement said they had 'very little' knowledge of the cooperative model. This seems to confirm, as previously noted, that a much better communication on the cooperative model and its benefits is needed. However, three quarters of those surveyed also agreed or strongly agreed that cooperatives can help youth to overcome the challenges, and thus far 100% of those surveyed outside of the cooperative movement wanted to learn more about the cooperative model. This may infer that a lack of knowledge does not necessarily mean a lack of interest in cooperatives.

In Europe, further results will be received from the 6 targeted countries. Therefore, these preliminary insights just provide a first look at the data already collected. However, it already allows for interesting comparisons with other regions and the secondary literature, which can be further investigated in the final report.

Cooperatives of the Americas

In the Americas at the time of writing, 81 young people outside the cooperative sector and 58 young cooperative members were interviewed, from Argentina, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala and Mexico; with an average age of 25 years and a gender balance of 52.5% women and 47.5% men.

As preliminary results, young people mention that their greatest challenges are the access to quality education and the difficulty of obtaining a good work or employment opportunity. However, they also state that the educational institutions, the public and private sector and Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) are the most relevant actors in developing proposals, such as ensuring equitable education access, strengthening technical training programs, promoting entrepreneurship during the phase of initial ideas and concepts, as well as the financing and development phases of entrepreneurial projects.

Among the most frequent opinions in the preliminary analysis, young people perceive cooperatives to be one of the most important economic models to improve their country's conditions; for example, on employment generation, entrepreneurship promotion, as is the case for the organisation INCUBACOO in Uruguay, which supports the creation of new cooperative experiences in strategic fields, aimed at generating innovative initiatives in sectors where the Uruguayan cooperativism has not yet taken hold.

In addition, according to the young cooperators interviewed, other sectors in which cooperativism can contribute are research, finance (including for studies and housing) and promotion of cooperative values; which is reflected as a direct impact on the Sustainable Development Goals, such as No poverty (1), Zero hunger (2), Quality education (4), Decent work and economic development (8) and Reduction of inequalities (10). Nevertheless, only 33% of the non-cooperative youth interviewed are aware of any cases of good practice in the cooperative sector.

However, young people are also clear that cooperatives coexist with a number of challenges to develop their own ideas and proposals, which are mainly a lack of opportunities to make themselves known to the decision makers and a lack of activities for inter-generational integration and training within their cooperatives. Further, it was identified that the main problem for youth integration is that on average, cooperative directors are around 50 years of age, thus when taking strategic decisions, vision contrasts with the strategic vision of youth.

Similarly, the young people pointed out that they usually join a cooperative because of tradition, as perhaps one of their parents is a cooperator, but they stay due to the youth integration structures. For example, 43% of respondents indicated that their cooperative has a structure for integrating youth; such as, New Generation, JCOOP and the Program of Youth Footprints in Costa Rica, UPEC in Colombia, the Cooperative House in Argentina, the National Youth Network of Caja Popular Mexicana and the Youth Committee of Cooperatives of Diverse Activities COJUCOOP in Mexico.

The youth integration structures mentioned denote important cooperative efforts to capture youth attention and to provide them with the necessary tools to develop themselves within the cooperative sector, in order to overcome the challenges they face within their home countries.

ICA-Asia Pacific

In Asia Pacific, despite being separated by geographical distance, the initial results from India and the Philippines (which were amongst the first targeted countries) show commonality in terms of challenges faced by youth, solutions proposed, and suggestions for ways in which cooperatives could enhance engagement with youth.

Unemployment, lack of adequate job skills, an inadequate or inefficient education system, addiction to drugs, social and cyber-crime, mental health issues – juxtaposed with overarching poverty, were some of the common challenges faced by the youth from both within and outside the cooperative movement.

The needs and challenges of youth vis-à-vis the cooperatives were a lack of information about what cooperatives are, how they are formed, and scepticism about career growth in cooperatives. A more structural challenge was on how to integrate youth from the informal economy within the cooperative movement. As mentioned in the Americas, many youth outside of cooperatives were unaware of good practices of cooperatives supporting youth in their country.

70% of the young cooperators surveyed believed that cooperatives can help the youth in addressing their needs and challenges. The potential of cooperatives was seen in the values and principles – the emphasis on “democratic systems”, “absence of exploitation”, “decent work opportunities”, values of “cooperation and mutual benefits” and “flexibility” to operate in any sector. The presence of cooperatives worldwide, as an actor with large networks, was seen as an asset, as were the managerial and technical expertise, availability of funds for community development, and physical infrastructure.

The suggestions for ways in which cooperatives could engage with youth were: youth-based training programs to develop knowledge and skills of youth on cooperatives or cooperative entrepreneurship, tie-up with schools and universities for information exchange, and involving youth in leadership and governance of cooperatives. Examples from Lamac MPC Youth Planet Laboratory Cooperative and SACDECO Laboratory Cooperative in Philippines, and the Madappally School Academic Project for Learning and Empowerment (MAPLE) project on education and skill development in India, were cited to show how cooperatives are fruitfully engaging with youth.

95% of the non-cooperator youth reported that they “would like to know more about cooperatives,” through “study visits”, “more information on cooperatives through books and internet”, and “open platforms” for awareness creation, knowledge exchange and engagement.

The promotion of participation and integration of youth in cooperatives is also limited, as noted by some of the young cooperators. Reservations against youth for having inadequate knowledge about cooperatives; limited scope of training programs undertaken; lack of branding and publicity of cooperatives among youth; low interest and investment in developing leadership and entrepreneurial skills of youth were seen as some of the challenges.

90% of the young cooperators responded that cooperatives have a disposition to involve youth in their structures. Cooperatives, through a bottom-up approach, could harness the potential of youth and develop future young leaders to enable youth to address their needs and challenges. One such example is by AIMCoop, which promotes young members and management in its institutional set-up; and another by SEWA which is promoting artisan and farmer-based cooperatives amongst youth and promoting new services in service cooperatives to address women’s needs and career aspirations.

ICA-Africa

For the youth surveyed in Africa, the challenges identified included a lack of cooperative visibility and information about the cooperative model, as well as a low level of capacity building for young people. Youth may also have a low level of income to invest in cooperative investments and enterprises.

Further, at the level of governance, the initial results suggest there are weak policies and governance to help the formation and progress of cooperatives, and a lack of innovation in the rules, procedures and policies of cooperatives. For internal governance, there is a lack of opportunities for young people to take leadership roles or be part of the decision making process within cooperatives, meaning that the integration of young people is not well promoted among cooperatives. In addition, a weak framework for consultation between cooperative actors was also identified.

With regard to the solutions identified, youth surveyed suggested that a clear legal framework and financial incentives to cooperatives could be introduced, to promote youth participation and inclusion, as well as capacity building and training for stronger youth networks in cooperatives. More cooperative education and training is also identified as popular with respondents, more specifically by increasing the numbers of youth cooperative projects that will promote youth enterprise, or through effective promotion and sensitisation exercises that can highlight how the cooperative model works and the benefits associated with it. Cooperatives themselves can better support youth by providing initiatives, services and products that resonate with a technologically advanced generation, and meanwhile offer training in financial literacy, networking, business development and management skills.

In addition, in the ICA-Africa region, a number of opportunities for cooperatives to improve their support to the youth were identified. It was highlighted that cooperative entrepreneurship should be orientated towards youth, such as with business ideas involving young people that require limited capital, as well as ensuring increased participation for young people through the promotion of collaboration, product aggregation and financial mobilisation. A diversification of the cooperative sector, into new and emerging forms of business, may also help in attracting young people to the model. Cooperatives' contribution to poverty alleviation is also an important factor to note among responses, given the development mandate under the ICA-EU Partnership and SDG 1 (No poverty).

CONCLUSIONS

This Paper has discussed the ongoing Global Thematic research on Youth, designed to identify the challenges and solutions facing young people in relation to the cooperative movement, which is conducted under the ICA-EU partnership for international development. As a global process carried out jointly by all ICA regions, this research is expected to have a significant outreach both within and outside the cooperative movement. In addition, the research activities under the ICA-EU Partnership, including the one presented in this Paper, aim to provide information on cooperatives that can foster greater knowledge sharing between ICA members, as well as other key stakeholders such as CSO partners and policymakers.

The present Paper has provided an overview of the research, including the background context, the research rationale, key objectives, and methodological details relevant to the research process. Main issues surrounding young people and cooperatives were also identified through an analysis of existing theoretical literature, looking at the cooperative values and principles, but also issues of participation and perception. Although significant challenges for youth involvement persist, notably in the field of work and employment, but also from an internal perspective within cooperative organisations, as well as in knowledge of and misconceptions about the cooperative model, a number of opportunities and potential solutions were already identified that can help to alleviate them. Such solutions include action by national governments and better education on cooperatives, but also through fostering new partnerships and collaborations between cooperatives, international organisations and education institutes, as well as enhanced engagement with young people themselves. This research, once completed, therefore aims to address knowledge gaps with more concrete action points and thus become a source of added value for cooperators and ICA members, by highlighting the specific situations for young people across different regions and providing a basis for comparison, analysis, and opportunities for improvement.

Given the global political context and the range of challenges facing young people, acknowledged in cooperative research, as well as in the international development priorities advanced by the Agenda 2030, young people will certainly benefit from improved support from the cooperative movement going forward. This Paper asserts that cooperatives, cooperative federations and cooperative entrepreneurship activities have an important role to play in supporting young people to tackle such challenges, which can also be further enhanced in a number of ways. This research further hopes to demonstrate that acknowledging and exchanging different experiences and good practices of youth cooperativism at the national, regional and global levels can help promote new synergies between partners, foster new alliances and share knowledge that benefit cooperatives as people-centred and youth centred organisations, while fostering the ability of young people to reach their full potential.

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