



Co-operatives and the World of Work. Edited by Bruno Roelants, Hyungsik Eum, Simel Eşim, Sonja Novkovic and Walteri Katajamäki

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Co-operatives and the World of Work

Edited by Bruno Roelants, Hyungsik Eum, Simel Eşim, Sonja Novkovic and Waltteri Katajamäki

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This edited book is the product of a jointly organised conference by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the International Co-operative Alliance Committee of Co-operative Research (ICA CCR). The conference, held in Turkey in 2015, focused on the future of work, working conditions, the role of co-operatives and the people who work in them (the editors estimate around 278 million people). The book brings together a range of contributors from Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Democratic Republic of Congo, Finland, France, Germany, India, Japan, Rwanda, Spain, and Switzerland and consists of 14 main chapters. While relatively concise given the breadth of international coverage, the chapters provide a wealth of information linking research and practice — what’s happening on the ground and case examples. This longer than usual review tries to give a descriptive flavour of the contributions.

The introduction frames the content by suggesting that drawing on the histories of the co-operative movement and responding to member needs, co-operatives can be conceived of as laboratories capable of shaping and innovating new ways of working, creating new employment relations, and work environments. Codification in law of legal entities and forms of employment point to this continuing contribution and the editors use as an example, the ‘entrepreneur-salarié’ in France, recognised by the Social Economy and Solidarity Law, 2014, whereby an individual as part of an activity and employment co-operative (Coopératives d’activité et d’emploi — CAE) can road test their business idea while receiving a salary and benefiting from the social security coverage of an employee. Once their business is viable individuals may stay within the co-operative or leave. CAEs are intended to create sustainable jobs and support regional social and economic development, and to support the transition from unemployment to employment. As outlined in the introduction, the first five chapters consider the meaning of work and the role of co-operatives, starting with establishment of the ILO and moving through to rights at work and differing approaches to protecting workers and to co-operatives as means to decent work and reduce precarity. This is followed by three chapters that look more specifically at how co-operatives work with and for disadvantaged or marginalised peoples with case examples from Rwanda, India, and Brazil. Chapters 9 and 10 consider relationships between co-operatives and organised workers i.e., trade unions in the first instance and worker buyouts in the second. The final four chapters bring us to the future of work — the Finnish example of co-operatives for independent (self-employed) workers; the French model referred to earlier for freelancers; multistakeholder co-operatives; and platform co-operativism. This clustering of chapters also helps the reader to focus attention on specific areas of interest.

Chapter 1 (Sanchez Bajo, pp. 13-33) explores the relationship between co-operation and the ILO since its inception in 1919, in three distinct periods: 1919-1930s; 1945-1980s; and 1990-2018. Sanchez Bajo describes how the first director-general of the ILO — Albert Thomas, a French co-operator, saw the co-operative movement as a “movement of ideas” (p. 13) and central to both national and international development and the work of the ILO. Later under the directorship of Harold Butler — ex Principal Assistant Secretary to the UK Ministry of Labour — the ILO developed relations with countries outside of Europe; one notable coup was the accession of the United States, achieved with the support of the US Secretary of Labour and first female cabinet minister in the US, Frances Perkins, as well as the first regional conference

of American ILO member-states in Chile (Eisenberg, 2016). Focus was also on Latin America where the ILO supported the establishment of producer and consumer co-operatives. Despite not being at the forefront of ILO activity from 1934, by 1969 15% of ILO development funds went to projects involving co-operatives, mainly consumer co-operatives and credit unions. This was, as Sanchez Bajo reminds the reader, the year that the ILO received the Nobel Peace Prize.

By the 1980s, the ILO was working with the ICA to provide technical support and specifically training around management of co-operatives, and development co-operation (with the evolution of the Committee for Promotion and Advancement of Co-operatives (COPAC). Emerging in this period also, were new types of co-operatives — social co-operatives (Italy), SME co-operatives (France and Germany) and multi-stakeholder co-operatives. The final section of the chapter brings us up-to-date with the ILO's renewed focus on internationalisation and the world of work, and formally recognising the ICA adoption of the co-operative values and principles (1995). The ILO Co-operatives Unit has looked at specific areas linked to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, such as green jobs (2013) and gender, equality and diversity (2016).

From this 'ILO biography', chapter 2 (Schwettman, pp. 34-56) looks more closely at the ILO's Future of Work initiative launched as part of a series of projects to celebrate the organisation's 100th anniversary (see Further Resources, below for link). In this, Schwettman, sees co-operatives as having a key role to play in establishing more collaborative working arrangements through the notion of, for example, a 'sharing economy' (which in itself is not without its problems, viz recent 'sharewashing examples' of, inter alia, Uber and AirBnB). Schwettman describes the major trends affecting work more generally before looking in more detail at the influences and effects of these trends on labour and employment and from this observations of the role of co-operatives more specifically. A quick PESTLE analysis (minus the political and legal aspects of the framework), takes us to the familiar areas of ageing population; population growth and the concomitant growth of urbanisation; technological innovation such as automation, digital and mobile technologies (although apart from consideration of computerisation and probably job losses there is no discussion of artificial intelligence and the future of work); economic trends (globalisation, growing divergence between rich and poor); climate change and resource depletion. The associated impacts are considered in relation to emerging and developed countries (Table 2.4), with the conclusion that the current economic system is not sustainable. In the trajectory towards post-growth economies, co-operatives are seen as one vehicle to building a better future — a co-operative future — of work (Table 2.5) — both in supporting the positive impacts and alleviating the negative impacts. Examples provided include migrant workers' self-help groups and co-operatives; community-based care-givers' co-operatives; workers' co-operatives of the elderly (to generate income and maintain an active life); shared service co-operatives (cloud and information management); and renewable energy co-operatives.

There are some assumptions here that need to be explored more deeply. For example: co-operatives "are, *by nature*, governance structure and conviction, promoters of equality" (Table 2.5, my italics). Promotion of and commitment to an ideal is different to action and practice; and suggestions that co-operatives are inherently exemplars of equity and diversity excuses the need for scrutiny of organisational behaviours (see for example, the ILO's own report on advancing gender equality — Schincariol McMurtry & McMurtry, 2015; this *Journal* 2015 48(3) for review of the report; and Birch, 2012).

Schwettman envisages alliances between co-operatives and trade unions operating under a common umbrella, and involvement in global supply chains that promote decent work as well as increase productivity of co-operatives. The chapter ends on the potential of collective action to enact this better future.

Chapter 3 (pp. 57-72) keeps with the focus on the nature of co-operative working with attention to rights at work — with the query whether this is the 'natural disposition' of co-operatives (as highlighted above), a work in progress or, as Eşim, Katajamäki and Tchami question, a commitment to action. They frame their discussion in considering the ILO 1998 Declaration on

Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work (FPRW), namely: freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining; the elimination of all forms of forced or compulsory labour; the effective abolition of child labour; and the elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation. The chapter then goes on to examine how far and in what ways co-operatives are addressing these four principles, with a number of international examples. They conclude that while co-operatives cannot automatically be considered “better employers” (p. 68), they can play a key role in advancing the principles and aligned global goals such as the sustainable development goals (SDGs). They suggest that, in part, this could include raising awareness, educating members, and providing training on FPRW; benchmarking co-operative performance against other sector organisations in relation to meeting or promoting FPRW; and developing assessments leading to certification schemes.

Jiménez (chapter 4, pp. 73-89) turns reader attention to worker ownership making the distinction in the introduction between “worker-owned enterprises” (not defined), some of which (unintentionally) fail to comply with domestic labour laws and international regulation and the seeming difference with worker co-operatives. The difference being “the capital in such entities belongs to the workers themselves, plays a subordinate economic role and has no influence on the distribution of power, because it operates on the democratic principle of one person, one vote” (p. 73). At the same time, Jiménez points to the vulnerability of worker co-operatives in relation to self-exploitation and advocates that labour law (and co-operative legislation) should include worker ownership as a distinctive form of work to bring it within the sphere of rights and protection. What follows is an interesting discussion and Jiménez draws on Gorz’s (1989) conception of autonomous and heteronomous work.

Chapter 5 (Hyungsik Eum) considers work and employment in the informal economy, which taken broadly incorporates a weakening or absence of formal arrangements and worker protections related to economic activity. Eum employs the concept of decent work to consider the associated issues and whether co-operative models can offer alternatives or solutions to the negative aspects of the ‘gig economy’. For example, enterprises responding to corporate platforms such as Deliveroo, Uber, and AirBnB by pooling services and protecting isolated workers, such as The CoopCycle Federation for couriers and bike delivery services (<https://coopcycle.org/en/federation/>) which has operating hubs across Europe and in the US; Fairbnb (based in Bolgna, Italy — <https://fairbnb.coop/about-us/>); rideshare schemes; solidarity co-operatives for sex workers and door security workers (see for example, “co-operative community interest company” — Security Professionals Support Co-operative — <https://www.uk.coop/case-studies/bouncers-are-clubbing-together-newcastle-hive>). As Eum points out while these types of co-operative ventures do not provide a solution to informal employment arrangements, they can afford, in the case of a shared services model, some sense of community, security, work-finding opportunities, and bargaining options (Conaty et al., 2016). Eum also warns of the lessons learned from the ‘labour co-operatives’ in Columbia and Brazil in the 1980s and 1990s (International Organisation of Industrial and Service Co-operatives [CICOPA], 2005). One solution put forward is the coopérative d’activité et d’emploi (described above; another example provided is SMart Belgium (Smartcoop — <https://www.smart.coop/> and <https://smartbe.be/fr/>). Both relate to self-employed workers in sectors commonly regarded as self-employed or contract environments. Beyond this, Eum points to the need for tailored legal frameworks and institutional support together with principles of decent work to strengthen the position and contribution of worker co-operatives in meeting the challenges of a growing informal economy.

Chapters 6-8 explore women’s empowerment and gender equality. While there may be observed higher concentrations of women in some contexts and co-operatives, this cannot be seen as indicative of gender equality. The context for chapter 6 (Gisaro M. Ya-Bititi, Philippe Lebailly, Deogratias Sebahire Mbonyinkebe, and Philippe Burny) is the Karaba coffee farm, Rwanda. In carrying out their research, the authors sought to answer two main questions: To what extent has the Karaba coffee co-operative contributed to social and economic empowerment of women? And, what is the impact of women’s empowerment on Rwanda’s

rural households? One of the original goals of the Karab co-operative was “to improve women’s income and reduce their dependence of men” (p. 109). The research points to the gains made through women’s engagement in economic activities and control over income earned, which in turn has benefitted their families and provided women with increased autonomy and networking opportunities for supplementary enterprises to fill the gap in the seasonal work of the coffee co-operative.

In chapter 7 (Sudha Kornginnaya), we see further examples of how co-operatives have helped women organise to support both themselves and their families and the wider community. Here, the focus is on participation of women in banking and dairy co-operatives in Karnataka, India. The co-operative bank has set up a charitable organisation and self-help groups to promote and facilitate financial inclusion, as well as other self-help and community-based services. The milk producers’ co-operative union provides training and support to 137 of the 179 women’s dairy co-operatives in the Dakshina Kannada and Udupi districts (part of a sponsored programme under the Ministry of Women and Child development). A further programme of development and support is via grants as part of the National Rural Livelihoods Mission (p. 123). These interventions have supported women’s increased involvement in economic activity through co-operatives with spin outs into other micro social enterprise activities in communities such as tailoring, poultry farming, horticulture, floriculture, and vermicompost (p. 124).

There has been a long history of support for dairy farming in India, most notably with the launch in 1970 of one of the largest dairy development programmes known as ‘Operation Flood’ or ‘The White revolution’ (see Parwez, this *Journal*, 2017) and other studies (e.g., Kumari & Malhotra, 2016) have concluded that women’s dairy co-operatives have a key role to play in enhancing the income and employment of women in the agricultural sector which has traditionally largely employed women. Kornginnaya, too, acknowledges the enhanced economic benefits for women but points to continuing challenges regarding the numbers of women in leadership roles and managerial decision-making, suggesting a need for “collaboration between the government and the cooperative movement for devising a favourable regulatory framework, structural reorganization and a policy mandate for integrating and internalizing the women’s empowerment agenda into cooperatives [as] supportive legal reforms and administrative provisions are vital for organizing deprived women into cooperatives voluntarily” (p. 129). A similar trend is the focus of chapter 8 (Sonia Maria Dias and Ana Carolina Ogando) which examines work practices and gender dynamics in Brazilian waste co-operatives. Again, women are employed in the sector in greater numbers than men, but largely absent in leadership and management decision-making roles. The chapter provides a more critical overview of the historical and contemporary macro environment, culture and practice at a meso-level and the precarious character of the work carried out by waste pickers and ‘informal recyclers’ (p.133). The authors also provide a useful backdrop to organisation through co-operatives — learning from international models, the influence of the Catholic church and broader social and civil society movements, and the influence of the policy and legislative context on the choices for organising with co-operatives seen as the preferred vehicle.

The sexual division of labour observed in the co-operatives leads to some jobs and tasks being undervalued in relation to others, which in some instances may impact on women’s earnings compared to their male counterparts. Dias and Ogando also point to stereotypical characterisations of women and asymmetrical power relations that also pervade the home and familial environments. Increased gender awareness in the sector, they suggest, “can serve as a catalyst for encouraging cooperative ideals of internal democracy and equality” (p. 138). The remainder of the chapter raises questions on why and how to do this and with what expectations and points to some actions already in progress.

Kurimoto’s chapter (chapter 9) on co-operatives and trade unions draws on Japanese experience. While providing an interesting historical overview the focus is on the relationship between trade unions and consumer co-operatives from the mid-1960s. The author describes the expansion of trade unions and consumer co-operatives in the 1950s and of their working together to set up labour banks/credit co-operatives, workers’ insurance co-operatives and

workers' housing associations in addition to worker-oriented retail co-operatives (although many were short-lived) and workplace co-operatives (e.g., Toyota Workers' Union and Toyota Co-op). By 1968, when Japan's economic boom had influenced migration from rural to urban areas and accompanying production, living and consumption behaviours things started to change. In subsequent years there were problems, including the oil crisis of 1973 and difficult relations with the USA over Japanese car imports into the US together. Additionally, with mass consumption came consumer concern about food production and pollution fueled by food contamination scares and in addition to existing co-operatives, buying clubs emerged — *Han* groups which had a predominantly female membership. While the numbers of co-operatives were on the rise, union membership (with a minority female membership) was in decline resulting in weaker links between the two movements. Kurimoto then goes on to outline the changing relationships and links between unions and co-operatives, particularly in finance (labour banks) and insurance, and in disaster relief initiatives. In concluding the chapter, the author points to the establishment of the Institute for Solidarity-based society at Hosei University as one way to bring about closer working relationships (see http://recss.jp/pdf/recss_en.pdf).

From Japan, we move to Italy in chapter 10 and the emergence of a legal and financial framework (the Marcora Law framework) for worker buyouts (WBOs). As such the author draws on a collaborative research project (Vieta et al., 2017). By examining the historical and macro-economic conditions and taking into consideration the favourable institutional and policy enablers, Vieta identifies key characteristics influencing the emergence of Italian WBOs. He outlines the surge of WBOs that occurred in the run up to and the after the Marcora Law (1982-1995), particularly in the centre and North-East of Italy — the 'Made in Italy' regions (p. 163) and again in the period following the financial crisis and continued austerity (2008-2014). In a country with a long history of worker solidarity and co-operatives, over the combined periods a total of 257 small-medium sized WBOs were set up with 115 of those in the central region — Lazio, Marche, Toscana, and Umbria. The Marcora Law provides employees with 'priority right' (*diritto de prelazione*) to buy out the firm before final bankruptcy is declared or before the firm is sold off to another group of investors (p. 169). There are also available special funds to protect jobs and to assist restructuring and conversion of firms into new co-operatives. The funds were managed initially through two institutional investors who are allowed to operate on a temporary basis as a financial member. Since the chapter was written the larger of the two — Cooperation Finanza Impresa (created by the three main co-operative federations) has merged with the smaller Soficoop (Bassi & Fabbri, 2019). As found with other studies, WBOs tend to increase in times of economic instability and crises and where there are similar (usually small-medium) firms operating/networked in the locality/region. Add to this favourable policy, legal and finance supports then there is a supportive ecosystem for conversion which, as found in this study, aids survival rates of WBOs. Testimony to this is the 88% survival rate with over half still active after 16 years and that new WBOs are continuing to adopt the co-operative form.

The next four chapters explore co-operatives for self-employed in Finland (Puusa & Hokkila), the development of business and employment co-operatives for entrepreneurs in France (Boudes), multistakeholder co-operatives (Novkovic), and platform co-operativism (Schneider).

Puusa and Hokkila point to 'new worker co-operatives' in Finland which, support independent or self-employed workers, which initially have generally been in the arts, culture and media (as in the UK and Canada for example, but also in areas of employment precarity). The authors look at the motivations of individuals involved in co-operatives of and for independent workers, which include personal autonomy (empowerment, self-management, and freedom), communal features (safety, diversity, communality). They provide a useful overview of the context and development of the co-operatives in Finland and suggest that they are both a stepping-stone to entrepreneurship — "testing one's business idea and gathering a customer base" and as a safety net in "providing a low-risk and flexible" option for organising the infrastructure to support their individual business and to offer social support and connections (p. 192). Following economic recession in the 1990s and high unemployment, co-operatives were seen as a means to job creation in Finland, with many being established to support state-owned labour offices

(p. 191). Financial security is also a component since members can claim unemployment benefits. As the authors explain, member shares in a co-operative with more than seven members represents less than 15% of the company and under Finnish law, each person can be regarded as an employee. It was towards the end of the 1990s that co-operatives started to make a shift from work integration to “more focused communities of professionals” (p. 191). However, all is not rosy, and the authors point to studies that demonstrate difficulties in organising and managing including limited understanding of co-operative principles and practice and inability to maximise the co-operative advantage through collaborative working.

Boudes’ chapter also focuses on a particular legal form that, in France, merges employment and entrepreneurship — the *coopérative d’activité et d’emploi* (business and employment co-operative — BEC). Again, we are presented with useful context and background to institutional frameworks in which a range of formal and informal work arrangements and organising have emerged, including web platforms, co-working spaces, and co-operatives, tracing the start of BECs to 1995. Boudes paints a more positive picture of BECs regarding the appreciation of the co-operative form and the processes of operation through shared services (tax, administrative, and accounting departments with staff financed via a share of turnover). As some BECs also act as advocates and provide advice to start-ups, they are also eligible for public funds. BECs were formally recognised in 2014. The chapter then focuses on a case study example — Coopaname, one of the largest BECs set up in Paris in 2003 and at the time the chapter was written had “more than 800 members (entrepreneurs with support contract, employee-entrepreneurs, ‘permanent staff’, etc.), 253 of whom participate in the share capital, and a turnover of 8 million euros” (p. 208). Coopaname sees its role as an animateur and active participant in the sector, an advocate, critical friend, a catalyst providing research, training and development opportunities, and gatherings (promotion and implementation of Principle 5).

Chapter 13 turns to multistakeholder co-operatives (MSCs), which as Novkovic outlines is not a new phenomenon but has been highlighted, and in some instances contested, as a relatively new institutional form. Here, Novkovic describes MSCs as integrating multiple types of members and, with it, multiple constituency interests (Maddocks, 2019) albeit for common purpose, into co-operative ownership and governance (hence MSC is often used interchangeably with the term solidarity co-operative). While there are a number of reasons for the adoption of an MSC model, Novkovic’s chapter in line with the theme of the book is on labour inclusion and includes an overview of the arguments linked to worker self-management and labour sovereignty. She points to the significant numbers of worker-members in MSCs in, amongst other places, Italy, France, Portugal and Quebec, specifically where labour inclusion is part of the purpose and mandate of the co-operative and, as with the case in Quebec, initial law dictated worker membership in solidarity co-operatives (p. 225). Additionally, Novkovic includes general purpose or social co-operatives as more recently supported and enabled by Italian law, collective interest companies in France, community benefit societies in the UK and development of new co-operative forms such as platform co-operatives as outlined in the final chapter. To illustrate Novkovic uses the case of Mondragon to “understand it from the pragmatic, multi-stakeholder engagement and governance perspective, in order to explore its evolution into today’s powerhouse of networked cooperation” (p. 226). Several examples of Croatian co-operatives are provided including Zemag (Cooperative for a Good Economy), which is part of the community supported agriculture network (<https://www.zmag.hr/>). Before concluding, Novkovic references FairShares as one model of multistakeholder co-operativism (<http://www.fairshares.coop/>) and introduces platform co-operatives as part of a movement for system change in the shift from platform capitalism to platform co-operativism as part of moves for increased labour protection and inclusion. These link nicely with the final chapter that considers ‘an internet of ownership’ as the next sharing economy.

Schneider takes up the discussion on the missing link between the development of internet-enabled platforms and co-ownership stressing their role not only as means for production — with a dominance for poor labour standards — but as “a means of connection” (p. 234). He touches on the concerns of lack of transparency of ownership of data and the growing

surveillance economy or surveillance capital (Zuboff, 2019) and commodification of personal information and the need to challenge dominant corporate investor-owned models. As Schneider rightly points out 'platform co-operativism' (Scholtz, 2016; Scholtz & Schneider, 2016) is not necessarily new to 'tech culture' — sharing code, open-source software, networked collaboration — but, he suggests, lacks developed democratic ownership and governance business models.

The “internet of ownership” of the title is a web-based resource run under an umbrella governing authority called the Internet of Ownership Project Council (IOPC) — “consensus-based decision making body that uses a pool of collectively owned resources to develop platform cooperativism” (<https://iioo.coop/project-council/>). Among other things, it is a platform of platforms, which Scheider points out “adhere to the International Co-operative Alliance’s standards for co-operative identity” (p. 237) and their directory provided the author with a source of published materials and conversations on organisation and ownership design. Examples include Loconomics which converted to a co-operative in 2014 (see P2P’s 2018 interview), Stocksy United (<https://www.stocksy.com/>); Smart — freelancers co-operative (<https://smart.coop/>; <https://smart-eg.de/en/>); TheGoodData co-operative (now dissolved); MIDATA Switzerland (<https://www.midata.coop/en/cooperative/>); New Zealand based Loomio (<https://help.loomio.org/en/about/>), part of the Enspiral Network (<https://www.enspiral.com/>); Seedbloom (<https://seedbloom.it/>) which helped the development of Resonate, a community-owned music network (<https://resonate.is/>); Fairmondo (<https://www.fairmondo.de/global/>); and several more that are worth exploring via their websites. Schneider, too, looks at municipal ownership models and sharing cities (see <https://www.sharingcitiesaction.net/declaration/> — for Declaration of Sharing Cities signed at the 2018 Sharing Cities Summit in Barcelona). The chapter raises much food for thought on the possibilities and opportunities associated with platform co-operatives as well as choices regarding ownership, governance, stewardship of resources and “designs [that] result in better alignment between platforms and their users, as well as fairer distributions of value among those who create it and the communities that enable them to do so” (p. 244).

In providing a summary overview of issues raised and the perceived challenges ahead, Roelants concludes with the need to consider the co-operative identity, values, and principles in a new light. Further, that these need to be seen as part of wider standards such as the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and the ILO’s Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work and of the concept of decent and productive work (p. 252). Much of this is echoed in the ILO (2019) Global Commission on the future of Work report emphasising the “need to reinvigorate the social contract to meet the challenges we face ...” (p. 23) — the roadmap to a brighter future.

The Reviewer

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Further resources

- ILO Centenary Declaration for the future of work, 2019: <https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/mission-and-objectives/centenary-declaration/lang--en/index.htm>
- For more information on FPRW, including global reports and updates, including the Integrated Strategy on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work 2017-2023 - visit: <https://www.ilo.org/declaration/lang--en/index.htm>