



## Exploring the Reasons for Setting up New General Service Co-operatives in Germany

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# Exploring the Reasons for Setting up New General Service Co-operatives in Germany

Isabel Adams and Reiner Doluschitz

Over the last two decades, an increase can be observed in the number of organisations with the legal status of registered co-operative (e.G.), including those in services of general interest. The reasons for this may be found in the interplay between supply gaps and unsaturated demand, manifested as deficits in services of general interest, as well as in the increase in citizens' willingness to play active roles. This article centres on the intentions behind founding such enterprises. Whereas in the literature, new co-operatives as described are mainly represented by individual cases, this article takes a comprehensive, systematic and quantitative view. The survey conducted in summer 2016 supplied datasets from 178 co-operatives in services of general interest. The 178 datasets thus gathered were subjected to a descriptive and structurally revealing statistical analysis. By means of an exploratory factor analysis (KMO value 0.726), four intentions were determined that led to the foundation of co-operatives in services of general interest: (1) redressing a local deficit, (2) preserving something, (3) helping others, (4) providing self-help. A comparison of the results with equivalent findings from the literature reveals both overlaps (1 and 2), and new knowledge (3 and 4).

## Introduction

On a global scale, co-operatives play a major role in a wide variety of fields. Their economic and social significance can be illustrated on the basis of a few general figures, not least that there are 800 million people in over 100 countries who are members of co-operatives (Deutscher Genossenschafts und Raiffeisenverband [DGRV], 2018). In addition, co-operatives provide more than 100 million jobs (Baden-Württembergischer Genossenschaftsverband [BWGV], 2018).

The modern German co-operative movement can be traced back to Friedrich Wilhelm Raiffeisen (1818-1888) and Hermann Schulze-Delitzsch (1808-1883), both born in Germany. Rural co-operatives in Germany were also started by Raiffeisen, who founded the first 'Hilfsvereine' (aid associations) for the poor, rural population, and small farmers. In turn, Schulze-Delitzsch began the commercial co-operatives when he founded 'Rohstoffassoziationen' (commodity club) for carpenters and shoemakers and in 1850 started the first 'Vorschussverein' — the forerunner of today's Volksbanks (see [www.dgrv.de](http://www.dgrv.de)). This was accompanied by similar approaches elsewhere for working together and jointly overcoming financial and existential challenges, one example being the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers, an association of weavers from Rochdale, UK (1844).

For a considerable time, the co-operative concept remained restricted to its traditional fields of activity, which included financial services, agriculture, housing, craft trades, and commerce (Stappel, 2016). However, an expansion in the legal status of 'eingetragene Genossenschaft' (e.G. — registered co-operative) can currently be observed in Germany, bringing it into areas that had previously been represented only sporadically outside the traditional sectors (Doluschitz et al., 2013; Klemisch & Boddenberg, 2012; Stappel, 2016). For instance, in the last decade, increasing numbers of co-operatives have been founded whose main areas of activities have an educational, social, cultural or artistic focus or who perform infrastructure-related tasks such as the local supply of food or, in some cases, even run leisure facilities such as swimming pools. These co-operatives, which display a heterogeneous range of activities, can in this context be categorised as co-operatives in services of general interest. The literature reports a renaissance of co-operatives (see, for example Haunstein & Thürling, 2017; Novy, 1985), a start-up boom or a wave of newly established co-operatives, whose peak thus far was in the year 2011 (Stappel, 2016, p. 61f).

The reason for undertaking the investigation and writing the present paper is, as addressed above, the observed increase in newly established co-operatives within the field of services of general interest, including those performing a variety of infrastructure projects. The expression 'services of general interest' (German term: 'Daseinsvorsorge') comprises the provision of goods and services such as gas, water and energy supply, waste collection, sewage disposal, educational and cultural facilities, and public transport and conveyance services (Mühlenkamp, 2007, p. 11), as well as food supply. It is rather difficult to pin down exactly what is meant by the term 'Daseinsvorsorge', partly because there is no legal definition, for which reason numerous definitions have been attempted by different writers, and partly because a corresponding regulation can be found neither in the German Basic Law (Papier, 2003, p. 686f) nor in the European *acquis communautaire*. It is this aspect that characterises its elusive and amorphous nature (Becker, 2005, p. 6) and, as no term exists from a legal point of view, leads to a situation able to "trigger a greater fascination" while at the same time "being a greater source of annoyance" (Simon, 2009, p. 11). The term 'service of general interest' (SGI) is the one used at the European level (Mühlenkamp, 2007, p. 707). A precise delineation and subdivision of this term is given in the section on methodology later in this article.

An amendment to the German Cooperative Law (GenG) in 2006 led to the simplification of the process of establishing new co-operatives and to an expansion of their purpose to include social and cultural concerns (GenG §1); a development that served to smooth the ground for new fields of activity covered by the legal status of registered co-operative (Federal Office of Justice, 2006). However, there are sure to be multiple reasons and differing intentions behind the rise in the number of new co-operatives. The focus of the present article is to summarise the various intentions behind the establishment of a new co-operative or that have led to the underlying situation.

The first step comprised an in-depth research of the literature followed by an evaluation of the German states' register portal, the Register of Cooperatives (Genossenschaftsregister (GnR)) for locating co-operatives in service of general interest. Subsequently, 21 qualitative interviews were conducted with representatives from relevant co-operatives. A questionnaire was developed based on the findings from the interviews, and the questionnaire was then distributed throughout Germany, in part with the assistance of the co-operative auditing associations. Hence, it is the second step, which forms the focus of the current article: co-operatives that operate in the field of services of general interest were surveyed on the formational history of their operations.

## **State of Research and Practical Examples**

There are a number of statistics (see, for example, Blome-Drees & Bøggild, 2015; Stappel, 2016) that verify the rise in the number of newly founded co-operatives in Germany and the diffusion of the legal status of co-operative into new fields. This 'conquest' of new functional fields has long become the object of academic research (Göler von Ravensburg, 2015).

There are several driving forces behind the foundation of a co-operative in services of general interest: these include the solution of specific local problems (Haunstein & Thürling, 2017); the financial straits suffered by many municipalities (Stappel, 2016); the challenge of upholding services of general interest in the customary form together with the impending collapse of infrastructure (Barlösius & Neu, 2007); and the supply and market deficits of various goods and services within services of general interest (Göler von Ravensburg, 2015; Klemisch & Maron, 2010; Martens, 2015). Indications of a weakened infrastructure include run-down sports halls, a reduction in local public transport, the number of medical practices (Düinkel et al., 2014, p. 117) and the closure of kindergartens, schools, and post offices (Barlösius & Neu, 2007, p. 84). Another factor triggering their formation is the citizens' desire to have good local infrastructure (Stephan & Krämer, 2017, p. 439). In summary, it is primarily regional infrastructural and supply deficits that result in the establishment of co-operatives.

For the sake of completeness, it should be mentioned at this point that co-operatives in services

of general interest do not constitute a phenomenon that is restricted to Germany. From a global perspective, services of general interest can also be found in other European countries such as the UK and Sweden as well as in North America (for example, Canada), particularly in the form of social co-operatives. In Italy, in particular, these are gaining in significance as a result of the changes in the welfare state (Miribung, 2017). Characterised by different market situations and state visions as well as by differing legal situations and mentalities, co-operatives in services of general interest are heterogeneous when viewed from a global perspective. The present article refers exclusively to co-operatives in services of general interest in the Federal Republic of Germany and their specific characteristics, as a legal amendment affecting the whole of Germany (GenG, 2006) led to numerous new co-operatives over the last two decades that have as yet been subjected to insufficient research.

Drawing on the work of Adams, Roth and Doluschitz (2016, pp. 137-141), the new fields of activity for co-operatives will be described in more detail as examples below and links to the project websites are provided in the endnotes.

### **Creating a cultural meeting place**

Through the co-operative operation of village shops or village inns, etc., a contribution is made to maintaining cultural and social life in rural regions. This was the motivation for founding a village inn in the south of Germany, whose main aims were social and cultural. Many of the citizens of the community in the district of Breisgau-Hochschwarzwald with its approximately 2,300 inhabitants wanted to ensure that the village did not lose its historical core. The goal was to create a cultural meeting place and to preserve the basic supply of goods the village. At the present time it can be said that the citizens' initiative has proved to be a success. Further cultural offers in Baden-Württemberg are provided by the Programmkino Aalen eG and the bolando eG.<sup>1</sup>

### **Creating social portals and supply maintenance**

Since the beginning of 2013, awareness of a small town in the Black Forest has increased immensely. The reason for this is the inhabitants' commitment to a project. In this town, the idea was born to create a social meeting place in the village through joint commitment, as the village, which once had three guesthouses, no longer had a restaurant. A group of committed residents founded the co-operative "dasröße" in Todtnau-Geschwend, bought an inn, and converted it. The fact that the legal form of a co-operative makes it possible for a guesthouse to be jointly owned by the citizens creates a much greater willingness and motivation on the part of the population to support such a project.<sup>2</sup>

### **Creating mobility**

The creation of modern mobility concepts is another new field of activity for co-operatives in Germany. One example is a citizens' bus association that is run by citizens and aims to guarantee local mobility in the surrounding area. On the other hand, WeilerWärme eG provides a fleet of electric vehicles, from bicycles to cars, in connection with the already existing co-operative electricity production and thus provides a mobility concept for Pfalzgrafenweiler.<sup>3</sup>

### **Taking over former municipal tasks**

In Germany, swimming pools are occasionally managed by co-operatives. During the development of a swimming pool preservation concept, initiators decided to operate the unprofitable swimming pool, which was threatening to close, as a registered co-operative. The owner of the swimming pool is still the city, and the co-operative is only the tenant. This has the advantage for the co-operative that it does not have to make major investments itself and therefore does not have to generate high profits.<sup>4</sup>

## **Creating care facilities**

Care facilities such as nursing homes, assisted living facilities, etc. also belong to an area that was frequently operated by municipalities in the past. The WoGA eG in Pfullendorf, Germany, provides inpatient care for around 55 people in its residential centre. This offers the possibility to bind the citizens more strongly to the supply facility and also to participate actively in shaping the facility's policies.<sup>5</sup>

## **Creating educational opportunities**

A prime example of such civic commitment is the private schools that have been created with the aim of establishing an educational institution with a very special profile and small classes. In addition, these institutions offer individual support for their pupils, whose parents are mostly members of the co-operative, in order to secure funding. Thus, these educational institutions offer parents the opportunity to take an active part in the school's activities and policies, at least in part, in order to enable the pupils to be looked after as individually as possible. One example of this kind of project is the state-recognised Peter-Härtling-Gymnasium in Nürtingen, which was founded in 2007.<sup>6</sup>

## **Research Gap and Research Questions**

In the literature the causes leading to the foundation of a co-operative in services of general interest and to their diffusion into new fields have been largely derived from individual examples taken from practice. So far there has been no quantitative and standardised questioning of management and supervisory boards in newly founded co-operatives in Germany on the background of their formation. For this reason, this study will investigate what intentions lie behind the establishment of new co-operatives in services of general interest or what intentions were being pursued by their foundation. Against the background of the increased number of newly founded co-operatives of general interest in Germany the motivations for establishing the co-operatives will be analysed (Blome-Drees & Bøggild, 2015; Doluschitz et al., 2013; Goeschel, 2012; Klemisch & Boddenberg, 2012; Martens, 2012; Münkner, 2012; Stappel, 2016). The leading research question is: What are the intentions behind the foundation of new co-operatives in the field of services of general interest?

By collecting and presenting the varied intentions that may be behind the foundation of new co-operatives, it is possible to address and encourage potential founders. In addition, such evidence-based findings may be useful to co-operative associations in helping them enhance the image and external effect of their co-operatives.

## **Data basis, method and description of random sample**

Academic discourse relating to co-operatives in services of general interest (and, similarly, community-oriented co-operatives, mutually supportive co-operatives, co-operatives of the community, social co-operatives or infrastructural co-operatives) is conspicuous due to its blurred boundaries and lack of generally valid definitions (Göler von Ravensburg, 2015, p. 151). The vast majority of authors make do with stating examples and categories of different co-operatives based on their main areas of activity. Similarly, the co-operatives in the underlying random sample were chosen initially due to their main activities. Moreover, the respective membership and support structure must fulfil certain criteria and have a regional sphere of activity. Only datasets that fulfil the following criteria were considered for further assessment:

- The initiatives/institutions must be registered co-operatives (eG) in the meaning of the Cooperative Law;
- The main activities of the co-operatives must fall within the sphere covered by services of general interest;



- The head offices of the co-operatives must be located in the Federal Republic of Germany;
- The majority of the members must be natural persons/private individuals;
- Not only members should profit but the co-operative must also be of benefit to a group of persons or to a region; and
- The co-operatives included must have a regional focus.

The purpose of these restrictions is to ensure that only those co-operatives or those responses of managing boards and supervisory boards are incorporated in the assessment that make a contribution to a region and/or the people that live in it. The focus of the co-operatives should not be on supporting its members' monetary profit, but on supplying goods and services of general interest. A further purpose of the restriction is to maximise the criterion of citizen orientation.

Due to the insufficient availability of basic data, a two-stage process was carried out for the purpose of collecting data. The first stage of data collection employed an explorative and qualitative procedure. For this reason, a further approach towards the theme outlined in 2016 was performed in the form of initial qualitative interviews (amount: 21) with representatives of co-operatives in services of general interest. The interviewed persons were founding members and at the time of the survey were either the chair or on the supervisory board of the respective co-operative. A standardised questionnaire was developed based on the findings of the interviews. This formed the basis of the second essential step: a quantitative, Germany-wide survey of co-operatives in services of general interest in spring and summer 2017.

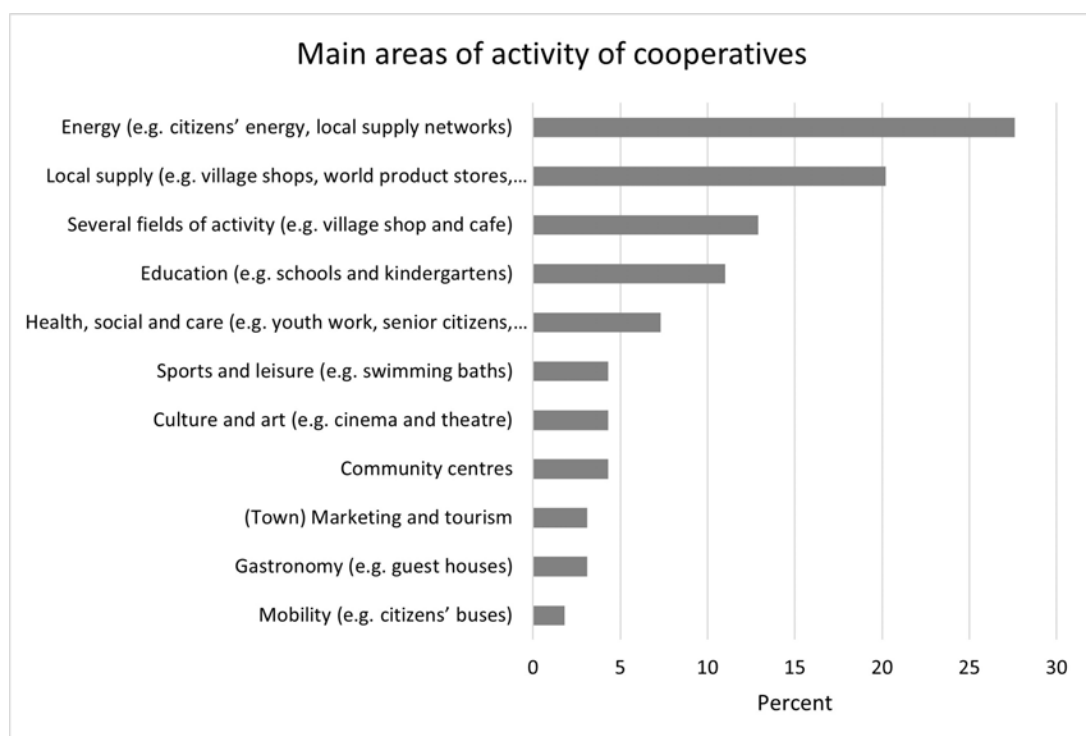
To enable the basic population of the co-operatives in services of general interest to be modelled as completely as possible, all 19 co-operative auditing centres and associations were contacted and asked to support the survey by forwarding the links to the questionnaire to their member co-operatives for whom the study was relevant. In Germany, the auditing associations are the central component in the procurement of co-operative addresses on the basis of GenG § 55, which prescribes auditing by an association. Altogether, seven associations agreed to help with the planned procedure. For reasons of data protection, the addresses of the co-operatives investigated by the associations were not published, and associations sent the links to the questionnaire. The associations forwarded the link to the survey to a total of around 900 relevant contacts. It is remarkable that primarily those associations with many members and a comparatively large associated region were prepared to help, which had a positive effect on the number of initial contacts. The reason for this could be that in comparison to smaller ones, the associations with strong memberships maintain an up-to-date and comprehensive member directory, including email addresses. Furthermore, the link to the survey was published in various newsletters. In addition, the joint state register portal that is accessible online was checked for contacts to relevant co-operatives. This approach led to a total of 178 usable questionnaires.

The individual datasets were first of all adjusted on the basis of the criteria already outlined and subsequently subjected to a descriptive and structurally revealing statistical analysis. The questionnaires were evaluated using the statistical computer program IBM® SPSS® Statistics® 22. In addition to the descriptive statistics, exploratory factor analysis was applied with the aim of condensing a large number of variables, e.g. intentions, to a few relevant factors and rendering them visible (Backhaus, Erichson & Wieber, 2010). By condensing the data, the determined factors could be subjected to further calculation, for example, in calculations of correlations between individually determined factors and other collected characteristics. For the purposes of this paper, the level of significance is interpreted as follows:  $p \leq 0.05$  = significant;  $p \leq 0.01$  = highly significant;  $p \leq 0.001$  = extremely significant.

To validate the results of the foundation activities, the questionnaire was individually adjusted with the aid of filter functions. This ensured that the questions on the formation phase, or to be more precise, the intention to establish a co-operative, were only answered by those persons who were actively involved in the respective foundation process of the co-operative being surveyed. This means that they were either founding members or at least were actively involved in the inaugural meeting. In the underlying random sample, this made up 67.1% of the respondents.

In line with the literature (for example, Haunstein & Thürling, 2017; Stappel, 2016), first of all heterogeneous co-operatives were grouped and categorised, see Fig. 1. The categorisation was performed as follows: Education (e.g. schools and kindergartens); Community centres; Energy (e.g. citizens' energy co-operatives, local supply networks); Gastronomy (e.g. inns); Health, social, and care (e.g. youth work, senior citizens, neighbourhood help); Culture and leisure (e.g. cinema and theatre); Mobility (e.g. citizens' buses); Local supply (e.g. village shops, world product stores, food retail); Sports and leisure (e.g. swimming pools); and (Town) Marketing and tourism. The aim of this categorisation is to enable grouping of the responding co-operatives into services of general interest in as precise a manner as possible.

Fig. 1: Main areas of activity of co-operatives in services of general interest



Source: own data collection and presentation. n=178

The responding co-operatives had on average 151 members (n=146), while a typical co-operative has 112 members (mode = 112). Nearly a third of co-operatives had less than 50 members, while the next third had under 200; the highest membership stated was 1,900.

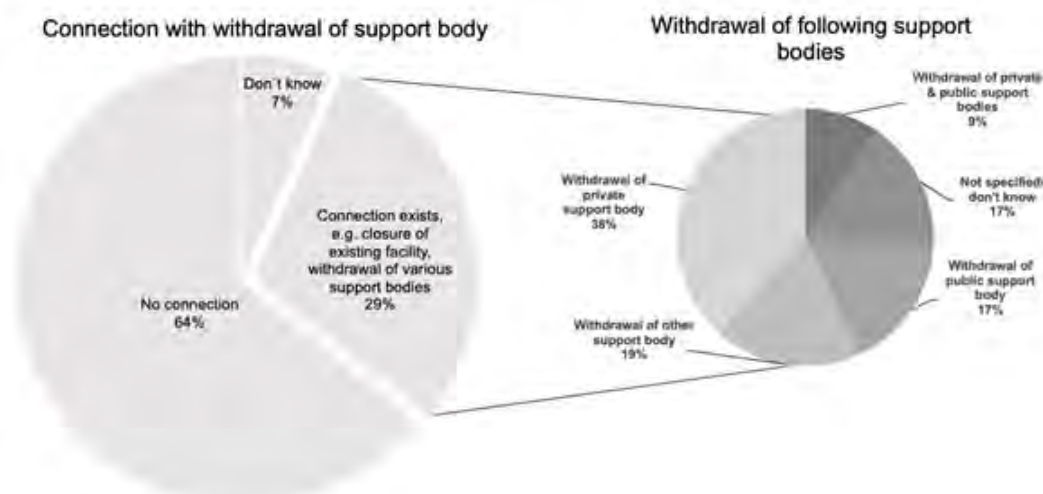
## Findings

The following results are based on the survey of co-operatives in services of general interest in Germany. The data obtained in investigating the foundation activities included the year in which the co-operative was founded. The following findings were supplied by 146 valid responses: the largest proportion (82.8%) of the responding co-operatives were founded in 2006 or later. The oldest of the responding co-operatives was founded in 1892. This result should be seen as an outlier; however, it is included as the co-operative in question has changed its emphasis over time and has only been active in the field of services of general interest for the last few years.

A further 8.3% were established in the years between 2000 and 2005. This indicates that the majority of co-operatives in services of general interest were formed in the last two decades and that the legal status of registered co-operative was able to diffuse into the field of services of general interest.

Initial qualitative results from preceding interviews (amount: 21) have subsequently indicated that some co-operatives in services of general interest were founded in the wake of the closure of an existing body and, as such, can be designated as successor institutions. In this context, on the basis of the available quantitative survey, it could be established that around one-third (29.1%) of the co-operatives indeed established themselves because the previously available supply threatened to continue shrinking, for instance, by the closure of existing institutions or the withdrawal of various supporting bodies (see Fig. 2). This mainly concerns the sectors Gastronomy, Local supply, Sports and leisure facilities, and Education. Most commonly (38.1%), it was private sponsors/companies who ended their support. In 16.7% of cases, public (state, administrative district, town or municipal) bodies withdrew. Sometimes private and public institutions both withdrew (9.5%). A further 11.9% gave no further specification, while 4.8% do not know which supporting bodies withdrew. Other references made included a falling level in the programmes offered by public and private providers. Irrespective of already existing institutions/initiatives, co-operatives are typically founded in the fields of energy, health, social and care services, and mobility.

Fig. 2: Interrelationship between newly founded co-operatives & withdrawal of supporting bodies



Source: own data collection and presentation.

To sum up, it can be concluded from Fig. 2 that around two-thirds of co-operatives in services of general interest were founded independently of closures of existing institutions or withdrawals by previous supporting bodies and were not a direct result of the withdrawal of any supporting bodies. A third of co-operatives were formed as a direct result of the withdrawal of different supporting institutions.

A factor analysis was conducted to answer the central research question concerning the intentions behind the establishment of a new co-operative. The items queried were subjected to dimensional reduction by means of a principal component analysis. This took into account those variables that related to the reason the responding co-operatives were established. The result of the scree plot suggested condensing the items into four factors. The KMO criterion is 0.726 and thus rated as 'quite good' (Kaiser & Rice, 1974, p. 111). The results of the factor analysis are given in Table 1.

The variables loading with the first factor have in common that they are of local origin and were formed with the intention of remedying a local deficit. The intention of the foundation was closely related to the local context, and the aim of founding the co-operative was to change the situation



on the ground. The second factor shows concentrations of variables or reasons for preserving and performing tasks (also municipal ones). The intention behind the foundation was to preserve and maintain different functional areas. The third factor, with a Cronbach's alpha score of 0.762, merges four variables. These variables had a charitable and altruistic background, with the intention of creating a place to go to or a meeting point. The fourth determined factor represents the creation of a (further education) network for those with similar interests, with the intention of providing self-help.

Table 1: Results of the factor analysis

| Results of the Factor Analysis  |                                  |                             |                       |                            |                              |
|---|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------|
|   | Factor 1                         | Factor 2                    | Factor 3              | Factor 4                   | Cronbach's Alpha             |
| <b>Intentions behind new foundation</b>   | <b>Remedying a local deficit</b> | <b>Preserving something</b> | <b>Helping others</b> | <b>Providing self-help</b> |                              |
| <b>Factor designation</b>   | <b>Locality</b>                  | <b>Preservation</b>         | <b>Altruism</b>       | <b>Further Education</b>   |                              |
| <b>Items</b>  | <b>Factor loading</b>            |                             |                       |                            | <b>(<math>\alpha</math>)</b> |
| Gap in supply <b>locally</b> can be filled or reduced by the co-operative               | 0.845                            |                             |                       |                            | 0.695                        |
| Existing <b>local</b> supply can be improved  | 0.835                            |                             |                       |                            |                              |
| The co-operative is able to address new target groups <b>locally</b>                    | 0.532                            |                             |                       |                            |                              |
| One or several buildings or facilities can be <b>preserved</b>                          |                                  | 0.640                       |                       |                            | 0.701                        |
| Something was <b>preserved</b> that otherwise might have disappeared/ been terminated   |                                  | 0.897                       |                       |                            |                              |
| It is possible to <b>perform</b> municipal activities.                                  |                                  | 0.758                       |                       |                            |                              |
| Point of <b>social</b> contact/connecting point (e.g. for new members to the community) |                                  |                             | 0.698                 |                            | 0.762                        |
| Creation of a physical <b>meeting point</b>   |                                  |                             | 0.836                 |                            |                              |
| Organisation of <b>events</b>   |                                  |                             | 0.606                 |                            |                              |
| Performance of <b>charitable</b> tasks  |                                  |                             | 0.837                 |                            |                              |
| Formation of a network for <b>like-minded people</b>                                    |                                  |                             |                       | 0.556                      | 0.661                        |
| <b>Place to go to</b> with own questions or problems                                    |                                  |                             |                       | 0.853                      |                              |
| Creating <b>further education</b> opportunities   |                                  |                             |                       | 0.799                      |                              |

Source: own calculations and presentation.

Extraction method: principal component analysis, Rotation: Varimax; Explained overall variance: 69.66%, df 78, significance after Barlett 0.00; KMO criterion 0.726.

For reasons of clarity, factor loadings with eigenvalues of  $< 0.4$  are not presented. Furthermore, it can be determined that an extremely significant interrelationship ( $p = 0.001$ ) exists between the altruistic intention and the establishment of new co-operatives resulting from the closure of a previous facility. The further education factor is of extreme significance ( $p = 0.001$ ) in smaller municipalities and correlates with the number of residents. There is no further correlation between the reasons for the foundation and the number of inhabitants. The results indicate that

there are different intentions behind the analysed co-operative foundations. The first two factors arise out of a reactional response to negative effects or events or the threat of these, while the fourth factor in particular indicates an active response.

## Discussion

The present findings serve to affirm the reasons stated in the literature, such as the wish for an appropriate level of infrastructure, alleviation of regional deficits (Blome-Drees & Bøggild, 2015), preservation of threatened infrastructure, meeting social challenges (Wieg, cited in Ringle, 2016) and solving specific local and regional problems (Haunstein & Thürling, 2017, p. 2). Moreover, an analysis of the intentions behind — and that have led to — the foundation of new co-operatives provides further new and supplementary findings. Additional intentions include charitable grounds, such as the creation of a social meeting place or the formation of a co-operative on the basis of the desire or initiative by like-minded people to organise, for instance, further education programmes.

Stoner and Fry (1982) coined the dual term of the so-called pull and push factors that motivate people to found an enterprise. The pull factors include, for example, professional autonomy and self-realisation, i.e. factors that are generally viewed as positive. Push factors, on the other hand, arise from unpleasant situations, such as unemployment. The first and second factors (local deficit and preserving something, respectively) in the factor analysis could be included with the push factors according to Stoner and Fry (1982), as they can be seen as a reactional response to a generally negative or unpleasant situation. In contrast, the fourth factor can be counted among the pull factors, since here the focus is on further self-realisation. The third factor constitutes a hybrid form. Findings from other empirical studies suggest that pull enterprises are more successful than push enterprises (Amit & Muller, 1996). A tendency in this respect among co-operatives in services of general interest cannot be confirmed from the underlying dataset, but this could be a starting point for further research.

In particular, the findings play a role in understanding the various intentions behind establishing co-operatives in services of general interest. Moreover, it gives various social and political agents a fundamental opportunity to communicate the varied and important involvement of co-operatives in services of general interest. In addition, groups confronted with various challenges associated with services of general interest can be encouraged to set up or join co-operatives themselves. This could render further involvement of civil society in the form of services of general interest more accessible.

The extent to which the foundation of new co-operatives leads to permanent success and the extent to which they are suitable for long-term compensation of spatially related structural deficits (Haunstein & Thürling, 2017) or can compensate for the withdrawal of various supporting bodies has yet to be seen; this also offers further approaches for additional research. The financial situation of co-operatives in services of general interest remains outside the framework of consideration of the present analysis. In general, the authors recommend giving more future attention to economic activity within co-operatives in services of general interest, as this serves to preserve the organisation in the long term. There is a further need for research on this matter. Finally, the underlying dataset provides statements on the backgrounds against which the co-operatives were founded and represents a meaningful approach — which is the first of its kind — towards co-operatives in services of general interest in Germany.

## Conclusion

Co-operatives are founded in services of general interest, among other reasons, to solve specific local problems (Blome-Drees & Bøggild, 2015). In rural areas in particular, the preservation of specific infrastructures is deemed difficult (Blome-Drees & Bøggild, 2015). The challenge of maintaining services of general interest confronts them with a process of

adjustment. In this situation, co-operatives represent a potential solution, as they are not merely oriented towards profit maximisation and are therefore able to exist in less lucrative locations. The great advantage of the legal status of eG is that the responsibility and risk of an initiative is shared by its members (i.e. citizens, municipalities, businesses) and thus spread across many shoulders; moreover, the supplementary payment obligation in the event of insolvency can be excluded through the statutes (§105 Art. 1 GenG). Co-operatives again demonstrated their resistance to crisis in 2009, a time of general economic crisis, with an insolvency quotient of 0.1% per year (cf. DGRV, 2009, p. 13). Even in the years preceding and following this, the registered co-operative was the legal status that displayed the greatest resistance to insolvency (DGRV, 2014, p. 7). All in all, co-operatives in Germany enjoy a good reputation among the population (Theurl & Wendler, 2011), which reflects a broad acceptance among the general public.

## The Authors

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## Notes

Web links to exemplar co-operatives:

- 1 <https://www.bolando.de> and <http://www.kino-am-kocher.de>
- 2 <http://dasroessle.de>
- 3 <http://www.weilerwaerme.de> and <http://www.buergerbusverbund-sauerland-hellweg.de>
- 4 <https://www.hallenbad-baienfurt.de>
- 5 <https://www.woga-pfullendorf.de>
- 6 <http://www.phg-nuertingen.de>

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