

Learning In, From and For Co-operative Life in Rural Malta: Two Case Studies

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This research explores three guiding questions. What do people learn *in* the co-operative, as they get involved in setting up and running a community-owned enterprise? What do people learn *from* the co-operative, as they interact with it in its day-to-day business? What do people learn *for* the co-operative, as they turn towards co-operation to create a more equitable world? The case study research is based on two Maltese rural co-operatives, Mgarr Farmers' Co-operative Society and Koperattiva Rurali Manikata. Ten one-to-one interviews and a group discussion were carried out in each co-operative. Transcripts were analysed by making reference to authors who have contributed to the discussion around democracy, critical citizenship and critical pedagogy. The case studies show that *in* co-operatives people learn how to turn personal problems into collective struggles, develop personal and collective identities, and assume responsibility in contributing towards the common good. People also learn *from* co-operatives, through non-formal educational activities and by interacting with co-operatives as customers. Civil society and people in power learn from the co-operatives as the latter build alliances to achieve their objectives. People learned *for* co-operatives, claiming spaces where individual abilities are turned into collective strength, scaling up the struggle for social justice.

Introduction

In this paper I approach co-operatives as learning communities. Raymond Williams (1985), Mae Shaw (2007), and John Gaventa (2006) discuss the term “community” in both its inclusive but also its potentially exclusive features. John Dewey’s voluntaristic view of human collective structures suggest a view of co-operative communities as the product of human action where individuals come together to share concerns or aims and find ways to co-operate with each other in order to reach shared objectives by working within a shared and communicated set of values (see for example Dewey, 1958, p. 217; Dewey, 1997, p. 5). A co-operative then becomes a community-based collective that fosters communication within its structures but equally engages in dialogue with the surrounding environment. If we qualify the term further, co-operatives are also democratic learning communities, that is, places where people, at individual and collective level, learn as they grapple with real life issues in search of meaning but also in search of developing individual and collective identities (Wenger, 1998, pp. 4-5). In this sense co-operative communities are seen as creative and participative spaces where people learn as they engage in dialogue among themselves and with the world around them. Co-operatives become structures that enable communities to make the leap from internal discussion about what is going on in the wider world to effective action, that is, an action that aims at changing what is going on in the wider environment in which individuals, but also communities, are rooted.

Essential in this discussion are the key terms ‘structure’ and ‘agency’ (Shaw, 2007, p. 27; Sen, 2001, p. 5) as well as John Gaventa’s power cube as an analytical tool that analyses community action on three levels: place, space, and power (Gaventa, 2005, p. 11). At the bottom line I agree with Paulo Freire, Amartya Sen and Lorenzo Milani that unjust and inequitable social, political, and economic systems can only be reformed by the underdogs. Within this paradigm, communities, including community-based co-operatives, have a crucial role to play in the quest for social justice, and that this process starts at the point that the oppressed or exploited become conscious of their situation (see for example Freire, 1990, p. 31; Sen, 2001, p. 11; Milani, 1997, p. 105).

One cannot discuss the quest for social justice if not in relation to the overarching concept of hegemony. Antonio Gramsci explains hegemony as a set of subtle manoeuvres by the ruling classes in order to win consent among the masses for an unjust social, political, and economic

order (Gramsci, 2007, p. 1049, Mayo, 2010, p. 22). Raymond Williams (1977, pp. 122-125), however, argues that hegemony is never total. In the interplay between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces, communities can be those grey areas which hegemony fails to control or even grasp and thus become spaces of possibility. Williams coins the term 'emergent' to refer to anti-hegemonic cultural developments. Within the emergent, Williams outlines the presence of 'structures of feeling', that is, anti-hegemonic developing modes of thinking, of analysing what is going on in the world, creative and innovative non-conformist value systems that can help to reshape dominant world views. I contend that co-operative communities can occupy spaces at the fringes of hegemony, outside the grasp of the dominant. Here they can cultivate their potential to create spaces where structures of feeling can develop and gain momentum as people within those communities strive to gain legitimacy for their divergent world views that are more in unison with their quest for social justice across local and national boundaries.

Co-operation Introduced as a Top-Down Solution to Local Problems

The story of co-operation in the Maltese islands started off in the Harbour town of Senglea where there were at least two attempts to set up a Rochdale-model co-operative, aimed at improving the living conditions of workers in the Harbour area, mostly employed with the British services. The first one dates back to 1884 while the second one was set up at around 1919 (Galea, 2012, pp. 6-7, 10, Baldacchino, 1994, p. 518). Very little is known about these two co-operatives and their demise is unrecorded.

Co-operation was revived by the British colonial authorities in the immediate post-war period. Baldacchino (1994) argues that:

the Maltese co-operative movement was ushered in specifically as a cost-saving, profit enhancing mechanism to boost agricultural efficiency and productivity. It involved no commitment to co-operative values and it was not inspired by a co-operative ideology (Baldacchino, 1994, p. 509).

Birchall (1997) writes that the British-Indian model influenced the development of co-operation in other parts of the African continent under British rule, arguing that it was used by the colonisers as:

an instrument to maintain the existing relations, to introduce the natives gradually into the externally controlled, export-oriented money economy, and to develop local, modernised, indigenous structures (Birchall, 1997, p. 133).

In Malta, co-operation was introduced through an Ordinance in the Council of Government after the Colonial office sent two consecutive dispatches to the colonial administrations in the colonies, dated 20 March 1946 and 23 April 1946 (Münkner, 2006, p. 1) urging them to set up co-operatives. Consequently, a number of farmers' co-operatives were set up and the office of registrar was instituted. This paper aims to show how notwithstanding the fact that co-operation was introduced in a top-down fashion, two neighbouring rural communities appropriated the model and made it work for their own aims.

The Research Questions: What do People Learn in Two Community Based Rural Co-operatives?

In the 21st issue of *The Co-operator* William King argued that participating in a co-operative was an intrinsic educational experience for the people who bear the collective responsibility for running a community-owned business enterprise (Mercer, 1922, p. 83). This research takes the cue from an earlier paper of mine (Cardona, 2010) and investigates the learning that occurs while participating in the collective endeavours of Mgarr Farmers' Co-operative Society and of the neighbouring Koperattiva Rurali Manikata. The paper aims to get at the "structures of feeling" (Williams, 1977, p. 128) developing within rural co-operatives as they oscillate between taking oppositional and alternative positions in the face of neo-liberal policies while analysing

the learning that goes on at the individual and the collective level. Secondly the paper aims to contribute towards a discussion about how co-operation can create new ways that people can relate to each other within different communities, how people can relate to the environment, how people can reinvent governance structures that foster learning and growth on the basis of equity and social justice.

I approached the research asking three questions.

1. What do people learn *in* the co-operative? That is, what do people learn while participating in the running of the co-operative, as elected members of the management committee, as employees or as volunteers?
2. What do people learn *from* the co-operative? That is, what do active and inactive members, customers, the local community, or policy makers learn from the co-operative's activities?
3. What do people learn *for* the co-operative? That is, how do participants learn how to turn co-operation into a political tool that enables them to envision and create alternative communities where they can exert more control over their lives?

To investigate these questions I identified two co-operatives as case studies: Mġarr Farmers' Co-operative Society and Koperattiva Rurali Manikata. Formally set up in 1947 in response to a colonial government initiative Mġarr Farmers' Co-operative Society is one of the most organised and active among the 'traditional' farmers' co-operatives. It acts as a farmers' lobby, runs an agricultural supplies shop and is a member of the secondary co-operative Farmers' Central Co-operative Society (FCCS) which manages a shed at the central vegetable market. They are active members of Koperattivi Malta. Members of the co-operative involve themselves with the local council and the local parish in the organisation of community activities. Their major concern today is how to help local farmers come to grips with competition from Sicilian producers as a result of Malta's joining the EU in 2004. Koperattiva Rurali Manikata is not a member of FCCS. It was set up in 2007 on the initiative of some farmers who were reacting against government plans to build a golf course and a motorway in their locality. It ventures into rural tourism, children's education in rural themes and the direct marketing of agricultural products.

The Research Method

I decided to conduct a qualitative study based on semi-structured one-to-one interviews and group discussions, drawing up narratives that as Cortazzi (1993) argues, lead the researcher and researched to investigate "culture, experience and beliefs" (Cortazzi, 1993, p. 5). I went for two case studies that would put personal and collective narratives in context, given that as Cohen, Manion, & Morrison (2000) argue,

human systems have a wholeness or integrity to them rather than being a loose connection of traits ... Further, contexts are unique and dynamic, hence case studies investigate and report the complex dynamic and unfolding interactions of events, human relationships, and other factors in a unique instant (Cohen et al., 2000, p. 181).

My first choice was the Mġarr Farmers' Co-operative Society, a very active farmers' co-operative set up in 1947. Secondly I chose Koperattiva Rurali Manikata of which I am a founder member and in which I am very active, mostly on a voluntary basis. It was set up in 2007 by a community action group made up of farmers and residents of Manikata.

I was convinced from the outset that a fruitful research process had to foster relationships built on trust and a degree of negotiation about aims, parameters but also issues and themes to be raised and debated (Goodson, & Walker, 1997, pp. 112-113). My first contact was the president of the Mġarr Farmers' Co-operative Society. He invited me to meet the committee in order to discuss the research. During the meeting I suggested we should go for purposive sampling with interviewees chosen from members of the co-operative, people sitting on the committee,

people occupying a post on the committee, and employees. They also had to be of different gender, age and level of education. Subsequently the committee secretary identified ten people who fit the criteria set out in the meeting and sent me their contact details after obtaining their consent to do so. Then I met the ten interviewees in one-to-one semi-structured interviews. I did preliminary analysis of the transcripts as they started piling up in order to elicit themes I could explore in more depth in subsequent interviews, obtaining focus as the interviews progressed. When the interviews were ready, I produced an analytical document which I discussed with the president. We then fixed a meeting with the whole committee where I discussed the highlights emerging from the document using a PowerPoint presentation. This enabled the committee to participate in the research process, contribute to it, and learn from the process, engaging in a very lively discussion about the very *raison d'être* of the co-operative they were managing. This meeting concluded the formal research process and consolidated a friendship which matured as the research progressed.

With Koperattiva Rurali Manikata the process differed on the grounds that I am an active member of the management committee. The secretary included the research proposal on the agenda of a committee meeting. I explained the aims of the research and the purposive sampling I was going to use, and the safeguards I was going to take to protect interviewees. The committee agreed I could proceed. I identified ten interviewees, aiming at the widest variety of participants in terms of age, gender, level of education and degree of involvement in the co-operative. When the interviews were over, I created a PowerPoint presentation with the salient themes emanating from the interviews and discussed it with the committee. A discussion followed around such issues as the need to invest in marketing to increase sales and cash flow and about how the co-operative could regain the fighting spirit of the 2005 action committee in order to safeguard the community's rights.

The process of data analysis started soon after the transcript of the first interview. In this way, analysis fed into the research process, helping to obtain more focus as the data collection process gathered momentum. Simultaneously I continuously got back to the theoretical framework inspired by critical pedagogy, leading me to raise certain issues with participants, as well as to ask critical questions about themes raised by the interviewees themselves. In this way, data gathering and data analysis were intertwined and informed each other. As a guiding framework I adopted the circular process which Punch (1998) identifies as the "Miles and Huberman Framework for Qualitative Data Analysis" (Punch, 1998, p. 202). This entails a cycle of "data collection", "data reduction", "data display", and "verifying and drawing conclusions" (Punch, 1998, p. 204). Some of the critical themes that emerged from the process were:

- Power structures at family, local community level, national, and EU level.
- Power relationships within families, the farming community, local residential communities, and between farmers' co-operatives and the national government or the EU Commission.
- Gender roles within the family, the co-operative, and the local residential community.
- Democracy within co-operatives and the Maltese co-operative movement.

I worked in a circular movement towards higher levels of focus, at the same time moving to and fro from critical themes that make up the theoretical framework.

Two Neighbouring Rural Co-operatives in the North-Western Agricultural District: the Old and the New

Mġarr Farmers' Co-operative Society Ltd

Mġarr is a small rural village to the north-west of Malta, surrounded by fertile irrigated valleys, with a population of about 3,500 people (National Statistics Office, 2013). The Mġarr Farmers'

Co-operative (MFCS) was set up in 1947 by twelve mostly tenant farmers, ten men and two women, on the instigation of the Registrar. A first general meeting was held on 18 March 1948. Seven farmers were elected to the first management committee. The first decision taken in the first annual general meeting was that MFCS should enrol in the FCCS so that Mġarr Farmers could sell their produce at the FCCS sheds at the Marsa and Birkirkara fruit and vegetable markets. This enabled MFCS to receive a commission on the sales of Mġarr Farmers at the FCCS outlets and thus secure some income to support the running of the co-operative. Soon after, the co-operative started selling fodder and fertiliser to its members (The Start of Mġarr Farmers Cooperative, 2014). In 1976 the co-operative bought a plot of land in Mġarr where it built an agricultural supplies outlet, an administrative unit, a meeting hall and a coffee shop. The building was financed by the government, by a church organisation, and by contributions from the members (Baldacchino, 2007, pp. 6-7). MFCS has about 180 members and employs two people in its agricultural supplies outlet on a full-time basis and two others on part-time or occasional basis. Galea (2012, p. 53) refers to the initial difficulties which the co-operative found itself in. Interviewees participating in this research, spoke of a time when the co-operative had to borrow money from its members in order to pay for debt incurred in purchasing stock for the shop. Over the years, as the number of goats and sheep reared in rural communities decreased, the Mġarr co-operative outlet changed its nature from an animal food store to an agricultural supplies shop. The shop today is a successful business venture, supplying farmers with most of their needs to run their family farms.

The interviewees included two full-time employees, one male and one female, one male part-time employee, and seven full-time farmers. Five of the latter were elected members of the management committee, all of them males. The other two farmers, one male and one female, were ordinary members of the co-operative. Ages varied between early twenties to late sixties. Only the female full-time employee had gone into further education. The rest had done only compulsory education or less.

Koperattiva Rurali Manikata (KRM) Ltd

Four kilometres down the road from Mġarr, perched above two sandy beaches, lies the agricultural district of Għajn Tuffieħa. At the centre of it is the hamlet of Manikata, home to about five hundred inhabitants, mostly full-time or part-time farmers, running small family farms. In the last two decades many outsiders settled there.

In June 2005 tenant farmers on government land in the area received notifications that their land-lease was being terminated to make way for a golf course for up-market tourists and for a by-pass as part of the European TEN-T road network. Alternattiva Demokratika, Malta's green party, organised a protest march in Manikata on 17 July, at the end of which, two part-time farmers asked me to chair a community meeting they were calling at the parish hall the following Sunday. It was the beginning of a two year campaign spearheaded by a number of farmers, called Kumitat għall-Ħarsien Rurali ta' Għajn Tuffieħa (Committee for the Safeguard of Rural Life at Għajn Tuffieħa). The Committee organised press conferences on the sites where both golf course and by-pass were to be built, sent letters to local newspapers, and met with members of the Local Council and of the National and the European Parliament. It also built a strategic alliance with environment groups. The result was that government shelved both projects and instead set up a Majjistral (Northwest) Nature and History Park on the land sandwiched between the village and the seashore. It was an empowering experience that led farmers to pass from a defensive to an active stance, using the skills learned during the campaign to propose and implement their own projects (Cardona 2010, pp. 253-257). After presenting a business plan to the Co-operatives' Board, the Committee obtained co-operative status on 24 August 2007 and became Koperattiva Rurali Manikata (KRM) Ltd. At the time of the research KRM had 29 members, 16 men and 13 women, full-time and part-time farmers, and residents from the Għajn Tuffieħa district. It employed five part-time employees, four of whom were members of the co-operative. Its income derived from the Manikata Rural Heritage Trail, a fruit and vegetable Sunday store and various community activities.

The Manikata interviewees included six males and four females. Five were members of the committee, including four part-time employees. The latter included the co-operative manager and the co-operative secretary, both females. Two other females were very active volunteers. The age of the interviewees varied from early twenties to late seventies. Six of the interviewees had only done compulsory education or less. Three had gone into further education while one was completing a university degree. Four of the interviewees had been to a church secondary school.

Learning *in* the Co-operative

What did committee members learn? The Mġarr committee interviewees mentioned how they learned to trust one another, to listen to each other and to look at issues from perspectives that are different from their own. They learned what to say and how to say it assertively. Committee interviewees were aware that their ability to speak out was a political act, mainly in defence of farmers' rights. The Manikata committee participants learned how to analyse situations, reflect upon them, discuss, and then decide and act together. In this process they learned what to say and how to say it to achieve the desired results when dealing with people in power. They also learned to be resilient in the face of adversity. Running the co-operative they had recently founded, they learned to deal with diversity among committee members and to understand how every participant had something different to contribute to the co-operative's enterprise. They learned to take different people's needs into consideration while shouldering responsibility for their decisions and actions. There was also a shared feeling of learning about how to set up a business enterprise from scratch and steer it towards sustainability. An interviewee suggested she was learning skills that she could use in her full-time job as a social worker, particularly the ability to see how every person has something to contribute towards society. Another said that the co-operative had enabled him to learn more about Manikata and its people.

How did they learn this? Mġarr interviewees gave great importance to learning from each other's experience. No committee member had ever had formal management training, and learning basic co-operative management skills from experienced elders was considered essential. They argued that in order to learn, one had to be open to change and needed to participate in as many meetings as possible, within and outside the co-operative, in order to develop the ability to speak out for farmers. For their part the Manikata interviewees spoke how they learned from their two-year anti-golf course and anti-by-pass campaign. They said how they learned from each other's experiences in their different full-time jobs which ranged from full-time farming to management, to full-time university study, to working in a bank, to home making. They were aware that this made the participation in the committee a challenging but also stimulating experience. The possibility of discussing issues, deciding and acting together while keeping the members' different interests in mind, was also considered as a major source of learning.

Why were participants willing to learn these things? There was a major preoccupation among Mġarr interviewees to want to be a voice for farmers in the face of major challenges that farmers in their village and in Malta were facing. They wanted to be an effective voice that would change the way decisions concerning Maltese agriculture were being taken in Valletta and in Brussels. In Manikata, committee people were particularly concerned with wanting to be able to protect farmers' fields from being taken over for development projects. They also wanted to learn because they wanted to make the co-operative relevant to as many people in their community as possible. They needed to learn in order to make the co-operative financially sustainable in the long term. Finally, an interviewee said that she wanted to learn because by participating in the co-operative she was led to challenge herself to do things she had never thought of doing.

Employees in both co-operatives also found that working in the co-operative was a learning experience. The Mġarr employees learned practical skills on the job, from using a computer, to driving a fork lift truck to providing good customer care. They also learned why farmers took

certain stands on political issues that concerned them. Finally, a Mġarr employee mentioned that the co-operative gave her the possibility to work flexible hours and thus was able to learn how to find the right balance between work, family, and finding time for herself, including time to attend learning courses related to her interests. The Manikata employees learned about agriculture and the natural and historical environment in order to be able to effectively host visitors on the Rural Heritage Trail. Their work with different people helped them to build their self-esteem and to practice public speaking. Having to practically create their own jobs they had to learn marketing techniques hands on. Finally, a Manikata interviewee said she learned how to find the necessary balance between family and work and to draw clear boundaries between the two.

How did employees learn these things? Both groups mentioned that they learned by listening to farmers or by looking up information on the internet. At Mġarr employees needed to set up a proper store, with a computer and shelving system and have useful information at hand to be provided over the counter. At Manikata they had to learn how to host visitors and students, providing them with relevant information on rural life.

Why did they learn these things? Both showed a concern for the need to provide a good service to clients. Both also felt the need to promote the co-operative's services, although this was more felt at Manikata where the need for creating a financially sustainable organisation was more pronounced. At Mġarr, the need to increase sales, turning around the co-operative shop from an ailing venture into a successful enterprise was interpreted by the employees as a way of building trust between them and the committee. This process was crucial for learning to happen on both the committee's and employees' side. In both co-operatives' employees were aware that their job was a learning process and were keen to learn more, both on the job and also by attending courses that would enable them to improve their performance.

Members from both co-operatives had learned how to turn private troubles into public woes (Shaw, 2008, p. 13), an essential characteristic of committed communities. This was especially evident in the Mġarr co-operative's preoccupation with speaking up for farmers and with being a voice for them with the authorities. The Manikata co-operative had actually come into existence as a result of a campaign which aimed to stand up for farmers who were going to lose their land and for villagers who were going to lose their hamlet, with its way of life.

Communities are also the places where identities are created and re-created. This was particularly evident in the two full-time farmers, one from Mġarr and one from Manikata, who were full-time farmers and developed their distinct identity as leaders of their co-operative, manifested in their ability to use the spoken word in order to speak up for others. Similarly, a female employee from Mġarr spoke about how she was key to turn the co-operative store into a successful venture and prove herself to the management.

A community is a voluntary act. It does not just happen. And members of that community are aware of what brings them together. In Mġarr there was a shared feeling of having to speak up for farmers with the authorities, and of having to provide members with a well-stocked agricultural supplies store. At Manikata there was the shared feeling of participating and learning from the process of setting up a community-owned enterprise that would defend the farmers' right to their land and the villagers' right to their rural way of life. There was the feeling that this would be done by developing projects that would promote all that was positive in the hamlet, its environment and its people. In both co-operatives there was also a shared awareness about the need to secure the financial sustainability of the enterprise, particularly in Manikata where the enterprise was being created from scratch.

A community creatively responds to internal and external stimuli at individual and collective level, creating and re-creating itself in the process. At Mġarr, new committee members responded to the internal stimulus provided by the more experienced members. At Manikata the stimuli emanated from the diversity within the group where members came from different full-time occupations and professions. This diversity was seen as a challenge but also as a resource since everybody brings a different contribution that makes the collective a unique

conglomeration. Both collectives also reacted to external stimuli. At Mġarr the co-operative community reacted to the need of the farming community to safeguard its sustainability in the face of Sicilian competition. At Manikata the co-operative reacted to political decision-making processes that were often concerned with the big picture: bolstering the economy by encouraging tourism and construction, while losing sight of the smaller picture: rural culture, the natural environment and the role of farmers in both. As co-operatives responded to these external stimuli, they re-created themselves. At Mġarr, the co-operative that was originally created on the prototype provided by the colonial authorities to organise the wholesaling of agricultural produce, re-invented itself as a customer-controlled co-operative running an agricultural supplies shop and as an advocacy group. At Manikata, the collective changed from an advocacy group into a community-owned enterprise. In the process of metamorphosis, learning and growth was occurring at both the individual and at the collective level.

Learning *from* the Co-operative

What did different people learn from the co-operative? Interviewees from the Mġarr co-operative were of the opinion that customers learned information about the supplies they bought from the shop. According to the co-operative manager, farmer-members of the co-operative learned how to behave and act in socially acceptable norms, not for the sake of following social norms but for the sake of making other people respect them as farmers, challenging widely-held perceptions about farmers as rough, unschooled, ill-mannered people, a perception which did not do justice to them as persons with dignity. Farmers at Mġarr also learned about new legislation, about the safe use of chemicals, about new cultivation techniques (especially strawberry cultivation), and about EU funding opportunities. The Manikata interviewees suggested that civil society organisations had learned about the farmers' contribution in safeguarding the environment and about the importance of safeguarding rural life. Farmers and the local community who attended courses organised by the co-operative learned various skills such as food preservation, food handling, first aid, the cultivation of fruit trees, and health and safety. The co-operative manager argued that visitors to the Manikata Rural Heritage Trail learned about the natural and historical environment of the place, contemporary farming, and local cuisine.

How did these people learn these things? Who taught them? At Mġarr, the co-operative employees provided information to customers over the counter and organised visits for farmers to fairs and farms in Italy. They also organised training courses and seminars for the Mġarr farming community at the co-operative offices. Manikata interviewees mentioned how sometimes they too attended courses and seminars held at the Mġarr co-operative offices. At Manikata interviewees argued that civil society organisations must have learned a lot from meetings with the Committee for the Safeguard of Rural Life at Għajn Tuffieħa, from the Committee's participation in protest marches organised by environmental NGOs and also from the media campaign carried out by the Committee that preceded the co-operative. As in Mġarr, farmers and members of the local community had learned useful knowledge and skills by attending courses organised by the co-operative. Manikata interviewees were of the opinion that visitors to the Heritage Trail learn mostly by listening to the employees but also by experiencing the rural environment in person. The store manager also contended that customers at the co-operative's fruit and vegetable store learn while speaking with the salesperson at the store or with the occasional farmer who steps in to replenish supplies.

Why would different people want to learn from the co-operative? In the case of Mġarr, customers at the shop would want to know how to use fertilisers and pesticides properly. Similarly, customers at the Manikata store would want to know about the origin and the quality of the vegetables they buy. Judging from the words of the Manikata interviewees who had founded the first action committee, civil society organisations wanted to learn about the views of the Manikata farmers and residents with regards to the golf course and by-pass because they wanted to lead a well-informed and effective campaign. With regards to courses organised by the Mġarr co-operative, attendees had a personal interest to take part, in order

to keep themselves informed about new policies, the latest strawberry cultivation techniques, or opportunities to access European funding. In Manikata, courses were organised to fill knowledge gaps identified by the members of the co-operative. However, at other times courses were organised also because the co-operative as an organisation stood to gain.

One of the characteristics of community is the sense of proximity to people's lives. The co-operative structures at both Mġarr and Manikata have enabled the local community to benefit from non-formal learning opportunities that were close to it in terms of spatial proximity and convenience of timing, contrary to courses organised by the agriculture authorities that were often held in relatively distant localities and at very inconvenient times. The sense of proximity to people's lives was also evident in the relevance of the themes and issues discussed during the training.

Co-operative communities are potential vehicles for social justice. In the case of Manikata, the Committee that preceded the co-operative emerged out of a group of people's sense of indignation at the fact that the authorities felt powerful enough to decide behind closed doors that a good number of farmers should be evicted from their fields and that a whole way of life should be swept away because they did not fit in with a particular paradigm for economic development. Their decision to fight together showed that while they were fighting for their own personal gain they were also defending each other's right to a living and to a particular way of life. It was an attestation to the belief that development projects should have the common good as their ultimate goal and that common people should have a say in establishing what the common good is. Judging from what the Manikata interviewees said, (but also from what Georgakopoulos (2011, pp. 19, 56) found out in her research), sharing this struggle with civil society organisations, particularly environment NGOs, as well as with the general public through the media, was not only a way of winning over consensus around their view point; it was also a way of sharing their knowledge, views and feelings with the public, permitting strangers into their world, opening up participative pedagogic spaces where the struggle for social justice could take place. The setting up of the co-operative and of the Manikata Rural Heritage Trail was a way of extending this process beyond the settlement of the two environmental issues. Similarly, the advocacy work carried out by the Mġarr co-operative was a way of making the authorities aware of the farmers' viewpoints and feelings about the political decisions being taken in Valletta and in Brussels and that were impinging upon the individual farmer's business.

Learning for the Co-operative

What have activists learned for the co-operative? What knowledge did they create about co-operation as a political tool that enables them to envision and create alternative communities, where they can exert more control over their individual and collective lives? At Mġarr interviewees showed how co-operation was useful for them in facing adversities they were encountering as a farming community. The co-operative structures enabled them to make their voice heard, particularly with regards to the EU's neo-liberal ideology of competition across borders that overrides the quest for social justice. They learned that the co-operative could create spaces for persons with different competences to contribute to a community-owned and led enterprise, either as committee members or as employees. The Mġarr case study showed how co-operation enabled local communities to overcome gender biases, opening up spaces for female participation in male-dominated structures. Co-operation can also be a vehicle for seeking consensus over local issues beyond the confines of the local community. In Manikata, the initial Committee for the Safeguard of Rural Life at Għajn Tuffieħa sought national consensus over the golf course and by-pass issues that were considered by the local activists to be of both local and national importance. Manikata and Mġarr activists showed that co-operation could be employed as a political tool to safeguard tenant farmers' rights, to set up community-owned enterprises that address the needs of the community, and whose financial sustainability is built on co-operation rather than competition. Finally, at Manikata, participants showed that the co-operative helped them to change civil society's perception about farmers, their work, their contribution to the environment and to the economy.

How did the participants create this knowledge about the benefits of co-operation to community life? At Mġarr, farmers expected the co-operative to act on their behalf and voice their concerns with the authorities. They elected representatives to the committee who, although not very well versed in official discourse, were quite outspoken and ready to learn how to use the word in order to influence the world and change it for the better in terms of equity, claiming and creating spaces where they could influence and challenge political decisions at local and national level that had a bearing on their life and work.

The building of trust was crucial to make co-operation work. At Mġarr, the co-operative created spaces where farmers, who were mainly knowledgeable about agriculture, co-operated with employees who had a good grasp over managerial, financial, and technical matters. This dynamic symbiosis was possible because participants learned how to trust one another, shedding cynicism and suspicion. This learning curve at Mġarr manifested itself in the way the all-male committee built trust in their female administrator, overcoming pre-conceptions about women's place in society.

The case studies have shown that co-operation can create representative voices for sectoral and local communities that, even if they are at the remotest places on earth, feel the negative effects of global capitalism and neo-liberal policies. Co-operation can enable sectoral or local communities to claim spaces at local, national, and international level to engage with visible and hidden powers. Particularly, co-operation has the ability to open up spaces at local level where communities can thrive upon the interconnection between individual and collective learning and growth. The more spaces are opened internally for individuals to interact and participate freely in collective endeavours, thus stimulating individual growth, the more the collective is able to engage with visible and hidden powers at local, national, and global levels, stimulating its collective growth. Co-operation can facilitate the building of inclusive local structures that would overcome prejudices and pre-conceptions about what certain categories of people are supposedly able or unable to do. Co-operation can help deconstruct collective frames of mind that hinder inclusion and prohibit certain categories of individuals from securing their own growth and defining their own identities by contributing to the common good in communal endeavours. This is possible because true co-operation is built on mutuality and solidarity over concrete issues of individual and collective concern, with a view to secure an equitable access to basic rights. As Jane Thompson (2000) argues about community organisations and social movements,

Their political potential comes from the creation of subversive space for participation and dialogue in relation to issues with which they are concerned (Thompson, 2000, p. 62).

Conclusion

Both case studies have shown how members of the management committees learned *in* the co-operative, acquiring skills at individual and collective level. Primarily they learned the art of dialogue, of inclusion, of setting up, and managing community-owned enterprises. They learned these skills by involving themselves in discussions, meetings, in the daily chores of running a community-based organisation, learning from their own experience, and from the experience of others around them. Learning *in* the co-operative was motivated by individuals' will to learn and to contribute to the common good, as well as by the collective desire to be an effective organisational tool for the benefit of the community.

Working *in* the co-operative enabled employees to learn an array of skills as they carried out various jobs. Their learning was motivated by their desire to provide a good service to clients, and to ensure the co-operative's enterprises were financially successful. They were also motivated by an innate desire to learn new things.

Learning *in* the co-operative is also a process of forging identities as individuals sway between private and public spheres. Learning was related to a shared awareness of the aims of the

co-operative. It was also related to the co-operative's ability to respond to both internal and external stimuli. It was related to a community's ability to create knowledge about the best way to respond to the community's needs by harnessing individual learning abilities and a shared, collective, sense of agency.

People from within and outside both case studies have also learned *from* the co-operative. These included individuals such as members, customers, and volunteers, and collectives such as environmental NGOs. Employees were a central source and promoters of learning processes, for people inside the co-operative, including the management and the membership base, as well as for persons outside the co-operative, given that employees operated at the interconnecting junction between the co-operative and the wider community. The proximity of the co-operative to the local community made it a vehicle for learning at community level, even when providing non-formal training opportunities. *From* the co-operative, local communities have fundamentally learned how to struggle for social justice by building solidarity networks that would enable them to scale up their actions from the local to the national and global level.

Participants in the research also showed they had learned *for* the co-operative, making the case for its possibilities for action. They showed how co-operation creates and provides grassroots and local communities that have been ignored by the authorities and by decision makers at local and national level with *created or claimed, sometimes invited, spaces* for making their voice heard. Co-operation opened spaces for collaboration where voices could be created, heard, and shared, values challenged, mentalities changed, consensus sought within and beyond boundaries, and action taken, in the quest for equity and for greater freedom to participate in the determination of individual and collective futures. Co-operation enabled local communities to create or claim spaces for voicing their views, even their anger and disdain, and for challenging political decisions taken on their behalf or behind their backs. Co-operation could bank upon trusting relationships, sustain them, and develop structures where a sense of agency can be harnessed and fostered to develop into community action. The latter could include the setting up of community-owned and run enterprises that are based on an alternative paradigm of economic development. Co-operation could also help to seek consensus within civil society around those alternative paradigms, in the face of dominant discourses that are more in tune with neo-liberal paradigms. While the latter tend to be exclusive, thriving on cut-throat competition, co-operation thrives on a bottom-up, capacity-building, networking approach to development. Co-operation between co-operatives and NGOs is essential for this approach to be effective and to achieve acknowledgement and legitimacy.

But for this to happen, individuals within the community should be ready to put themselves, their values, beliefs, lifestyles and work practices into question. Getting into this dialogical process focused on personal and collective growth is about moving out of comfort zones and getting ready to give as much as to get, to lose as much as to gain.

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