

COOPERATIVE PLATFORMS IN A EUROPEAN LANDSCAPE: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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1. Introduction

In the past few years we have assisted to the rapid spread and growth of what is now commonly called the “sharing” or “collaborative economy”. These terms are usually used to refer to a broad and varied group of experiences that, in different ways and sectors, promote the use of digital platforms to connect distributed groups of people and enable them to exchange, share resources, or collaborate in different ways. New collaborative economy platforms are continuously being launched by companies, nonprofits, informal groups, or even public actors, and operate sometimes locally, sometimes at a national or even global scale. The underlying idea is that many existing resources are underutilised by their owners, and they could be better valorized if shared or exchanged with others who may be in need of them. This may be applied to material resources (a spare room in the apartment, or a car that is underutilised by its owner), as well as immaterial resources (time, specific knowledge, etc). The collaborative economy is usually based on digital platforms because these makes it easier, faster, and less expensive to share and exchange, but we are also assisting to the emergence of other forms of “sharing” and “collaboration”, which take for example place in physical spaces (co-working) or through different organizational forms.

The emergence of the collaborative economy comes with the spread and revitalization in the past years of powerful discourses about “collaboration”, “participation”, “sharing”, and so on, which are of course not new in human history, but are taking momentum also due to the economic crisis and the need of people to feel connected and access resources in convenient ways.

We find particularly interesting to investigate the potential interaction between the collaborative economy and cooperative companies. Born in the XIXth century, cooperatives are a large movement counting in 2015 almost 180,000 enterprises in the world, over 140 million members, more than 4,5 billion employees and more than €1,000 billion turnover. Only in Europe, there are

127 million members, meaning that 1 out of 5 people in the EU is a cooperative member, and these numbers are constantly increasing (Cooperatives Europe, 2015).¹

Despite their continuous growth and territorial presence, like any other social and economic actor cooperatives need constant evolution to maintain and enhance their social and economic role. The underlying hypothesis of the reflections proposed in this paper is that the collaborative economy, with its capacity to design new forms of social interaction and to use digital technologies in smart ways, can be one of the drivers for the innovation of cooperatives companies. On the other hand, we believe that cooperatives as well could provide valuable examples and inputs to the collaborative economy sustainable and positive development, especially by proposing their ownership and governance model and by valorizing their long history and capacity to keep together social and economic objectives in a unique project of local development.

Following this intuition, in 2015 the Unipolis Foundation in Italy promoted together with Generazioni - Legacoop a research titled “From the Sharing Economy to the Collaborative Economy: impacts and opportunities for the cooperative movement” (Como et al., 2015)², which explored the possibilities for a convergence between cooperatives and collaborative economy practices. The study, coordinated by LAMA Agency³ and carried out in collaboration with Social Seed,⁴ highlighted a number of possible innovation paths and challenges for the cooperative movement.

Based on this study, LAMA Agency and Cooperatives Europe⁵ decided to develop a similar reflection at European level, and to involve cooperative associations from a broad range of countries.

¹ Since 2009, cooperative enterprises in Europe have increased by 12% and members have increased by 14%. For more statistics and information on cooperatives in Europe see www.coopseurope.coop.

² Original title: “Dalla sharing economy all’economia collaborativa: l’impatto e le opportunità per il movimento cooperativo”.

³ LAMA Agency is a cooperative consultancy company that carries out research and strategic consulting activities in different fields, including digital, organizational, and social innovation. LAMA works with a broad range of partners and clients including companies, nonprofits, public administrations, international organizations. In particular, LAMA has 10 years of experience supporting innovation of cooperative companies in Italy and abroad (www.agenzialama.eu).

⁴ Social Seed is an Italian consulting company working in the area of social innovation (www.socialseed.eu).

⁵ Cooperatives Europe is the umbrella organisation bringing together cooperative organizations from 33 European countries (<https://coopseurope.coop>).

Through a number of interviews with representatives of national cooperative associations, and through an online mapping survey aimed at identifying existing cases of cooperatives that are already experimenting with collaborative economy logics, this study allowed us to draw an initial picture of the state of the art. More research needs to be done to better understand, especially from an empirical point of view, the dynamics that are developing on the ground between cooperation and collaborative economy and the future challenges and opportunities; however, this constitutes an important first step in an interesting and promising direction.

2. Background and theoretical framework

a. What is the collaborative economy? Concepts, key empirical features, and trends

When we talk about “collaborative economy” we are actually referring to a broad variety of empirical experience that can be very different from one another, and for this reason are sometimes named in different ways (*sharing economy*, *peer economy*⁶, *crowd economy*, *access economy*⁷, *gig economy*, *the mesh*⁸, etc), although the term “collaborative economy” seems to be one of the most used at least in Europe.⁹

In a well known publication on this topics, the organization NESTA gives the following definition:

“The collaborative economy as we define it involves using internet technologies to connect distributed groups of people to make better use of goods, skills and other useful things. It allows people to communicate in a peer-to-peer way” (Stokes et al., 2014).

⁶ P2P Foundation Wiki (2016), *Category: Collaborative Economy*, [online]. Available at: [https://wiki.peer-to-peerfoundation.net/Category:Collaborative Economy](https://wiki.peer-to-peerfoundation.net/Category:Collaborative_Economy) [Accessed 25 Aug. 2016].

⁷ See also:

- Triple Pundit (2016), *Access Economy*, [online]. Available at: <http://www.triplepundit.com/topic/access-economy/> [Accessed 18 Aug. 2016]
- Rifkin, J. (2000). *The age of access*. New York: J.P. Tarcher/Putnam
- Etheridge, E. (2016). The end of ownership culture. *The New York Times*, [online] p.The Opinion Pages. Available at: http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/01/22/the-end-of-ownership-culture/?_r=0 [Accessed 6 Aug. 2016]

⁸ See: Meshing.it (2016). Mesh - the pulse of the sharing economy. [online] Available at: <http://meshing.it/about> [Accessed 5 Aug. 2016]

⁹ The term “collaborative economy” has been used for example by the organization Ouishare, which is one of the leading networks on this topic (www.ouishare.net).

An alternative way to define it is:

“a broad and varied group of practices and innovative models that use digital technologies to facilitate collaboration and exchange between peers, and to maximise the use of underutilised resources”.¹⁰

The collaborative economy is spreading in almost every sector. Although it is not easy to provide an exact taxonomy of such a young and rapidly evolving phenomenon, we can refer to the conceptualization started by Botsman and Rogers (2010) and subsequently elaborated by Stokes et al. (2014), who identified 5 main groups of collaborative economy practices.

The first group, including the large majority of known empirical cases, is defined “**collaborative consumption**”, and includes all those platforms that allow people to exchange goods and services in a horizontal way. Exchange can be for free, paying or with alternative arrangements; in the case of goods the forms can be diverse including sale, rent, lending, barter, depending on the case. The second group is called “**collaborative production**”, and refers to the new practices of horizontal collaboration between people and groups that share knowledge and tools for fast prototyping and decentralised production. The third group is “**collaborative learning**” and refers to the practices of shared knowledge production and diffusion enabled by the web and digital technologies. A fourth group is called “collaborative finance” and includes mainly crowdfunding (debt or equity), peer-to-peer lending, and alternative currency systems. Lastly, “**collaborative governance**” refers to the emergence of new tools and systems to manage horizontal and decentralised governance (for example through blockchain technologies) and systems of participatory governance at city and community level.

In many cases, the common element is the use of a “platform model”,¹¹ which takes however a

¹⁰ Translated from Como et al. (2015).

¹¹ For more insights into platform business models see Accenture (2016). Platform Economy: Technology-driven business model innovation from the outside in. *Technology Vision 2016* [online]. Available at: <https://www.accenture.com/fr-fr/acnmedia/PDF-2/Accenture-Platform-Economy-Technology-Vision-2016-france.pdf> [Accessed 22 Jul. 2016].

different form in each of the categories and “groups” described above. In particular, the specific rationale and functioning of the platform model as used in collaborative consumption has been described by the European Business Observatory publication “The Sharing Economy: accessibility based business models for peer-to-peer markets” (Dervojeda et. al., 2013). Such accessibility-based business model consists of the creation of an enabling platform that facilitates the matching between supply and demand of goods and services between peers. The company that runs the platform does not own means of production, does not deliver the specific services, does not even select the worker that will deliver the service; rather, it provides the enabling infrastructure for the market transaction between peers. Since trust between users is a prerequisite for peer-to-peer markets, the platform provides a reputational rating-driven mechanism. The platform usually takes a commission for each transaction, gets paid in the form of subscriptions, or finds other sources of income streams such as sponsorships.

Collaborative consumption, considered its potential for the creation of monetary exchanges and for the generation of real (peer-to-peer) markets, tends to be a ground of development for enterprises with a commercial nature, which find in them a proper and profitable business opportunity. Thanks to the scaling potential of such platforms, they are able to attract big investments from venture capitalists, and some are emerging as proper global actors. The commercial nature of collaborative platforms generates some criticism concerning their governance and the way value is generated and appropriated. Indeed, there is an issue emerging from the fact that while users bring to the platforms the fundamental assets that create value, the deriving profits are appropriated by the restricted group of platform owners. Moreover, the large multinational platforms are criticised because of their “unfair” competition with existing businesses, which is made possible by regulation gaps. Other issues concern the lacking protection of consumers and workers in these new and still unregulated platforms.

However, as we have already recalled, there are many more types of peer-to-peer platforms that

promote exchange, barter, and even peer-to-peer services on a small scale and in a fairer way, qualifying themselves as possible new forms of social businesses.

In general, it seems evident that the broad diversity of actors behind different collaborative economy experiences (in terms of legal form, mission, etc) brings with it important differences in terms of social impact. Indeed, bottom-up initiatives promoted by nonprofit organizations, differently from the cases discussed above, aim to promote exchanges that are more based on solidarity (gift, volunteering, etc), reciprocity and a desire to promote strong ties between people. We may speak of a form of “collaboration” that is “cooperative” rather than “competitive”, because the peer-to-peer relation is inspired by shared values and an idea of positive impact on the community.¹²

b. The policy context at European and member States level

The interest of the European Commission on the phenomenon is very recent. Only in June 2016 (European Commission, 2016c) it released an official position about the Collaborative Economy, focussing mainly on the collaborative consumption and peer-to-peer markets due to three main reasons:

- a) Economic potential: in 2015 the aggregate turnover reached by these type of businesses was €28 billion ;
- b) Consumers’ opportunities: the European consumer’s interest, in terms of prices reduction and savings, is solid and high (European Union: European Commission, 2016b);
- c) New markets generation: it’s likely the emergence of new side-businesses able to capture the potential of these fast growing markets (indirect employment impact).

The debate around the collaborative economy impact on traditional businesses and on existing legal frameworks moves the Commission to consider the correlated risks of “blurring the lines between

¹² Pais. I. and Provasi G. (2015) propose an interesting analysis of collaborative economy practices based on the application of Karl Polanyi’s concepts of exchange, reciprocity, and redistribution. In particular these authors propose to focus on the social innovation potential of certain forms of collaborative economy that emphasise reciprocity.

consumer and provider, employee and self-employed, or the professional and non-professional provision of services” in terms of quality and quantity of employment generated, labour protection and safety and labour rights, consumer behaviour, safety and protection in a highly fragmented legal framework among the different EU countries and risks of democracy and access to markets opportunities.

Considering “bans and quantitative restriction of an activity normally constituted a measure of last resort”, the EC and Member States attest on a “normalizing approach”, based on the introduction of new rules to reduce national gaps in terms of regulation while avoid threatening the innovative potential of these businesses. As mentioned in the document, *“when reassessing the justification and proportionality of legislation applicable to the collaborative economy, national authorities should generally take into consideration the specific features of collaborative economy business models and the tools they may put in place to address public policy concerns, for instance in relation to access, quality or safety. For example, rating and reputational systems or other mechanisms to discourage harmful behaviour by market participants may in some cases reduce risks for consumers stemming from information asymmetries.”* (European Union: European Commission, 2016c:4). Following this “prudential” regulatory approach, few are the documents advocating for direct support measures to the collaborative economy.

The DG Growth, is entitled to treat both the cooperative movement and the collaborative economy topic (European Union: European Commission, 2016a). Between July 2013 and November 2014, the former Commissioner Antonio Tajani promoted a dedicated working group with the aim to “assess the specific needs of cooperative enterprises with regard to a wide variety of issues such as the appropriate EU regulatory framework, the identification of barriers at national level, the internationalization of cooperatives, financial and business support mechanisms, entrepreneurship education and the general promotion of the cooperative model among young people as well as the potential of business transfers into cooperatives to avoid business close downs.” (European Union:

European Commission, 2015). However, even though Collaborative Economy and Cooperatives live at the same EC's floor, no official document has yet started to explore the opportunities of interactions between the two. Recent EU publications (e.g. Centre for European Policy Studies "The Impact of the collaborative Economy on the Labour Market"¹³, "The Cost of Non-Europe in the Sharing Economy"¹⁴ and "The Future of Work in the Sharing Economy"¹⁵), still never mention the cooperative form as an option to mitigate the risks related to the collaborative economy.

Thus, as we will see later, our initial empirical investigation found that many cases are already emerging on the ground.

c. Collaborative economy and cooperatives: why?

The first interest in the relationship between cooperatives and collaborative economy comes from the United States. The USA are indeed the motherland of some large global platforms that were the first to show the risks and downsides of a commercial and uncontrolled exploitation of so-called peer-to-peer markets.

In 2014, Trebor Scholz, Associate Professor for Culture & Media at The New School in New York City, proposed his analysis where he criticised these platforms for their deceptive use of collaborative economy discourses, and explained how they actually realize profits by operating in unregulated markets and extracting value from people's work, time, capacity, and assets (Scholz, 2014). Indeed, these platforms push for the emergence of large masses of precarious on-demand workers, who are not formally recognized as employees and have no rights or say in the company they depend on. At the same time, the platforms do not take any responsibility in relation to the

¹³ De Groen, W. P. and Maselli, I. (2016). The Impact of the Collaborative Economy on the Labour Market. *CEPS Special Report* (35) N° 138. Available at: <https://www.ceps.eu/publications/impact-collaborative-economy-labour-market> [Accessed 20 Aug. 2016].

¹⁴Goudin, P. (2016). The Cost of Non-Europe in the Sharing Economy – Economic Social and Legal Challenges and Opportunities. *European Parliamentary Research Service*. Available at: [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2016/558777/EPRS_STU\(2016\)558777_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2016/558777/EPRS_STU(2016)558777_EN.pdf) [Accessed 22 Aug. 2016].

¹⁵ Codagnone C., Abadie F., Biagi F. (2016); The Future of Work in the 'Sharing Economy'. Market Efficiency and Equitable Opportunities or Unfair Precarisation? *Institute for Prospective Technological Studies*, JRC Science for Policy Report EUR 27913 EN, doi:10.2791/431485

quality and safety of the services provided by their on-demand “freelance” workers, and on the socio-economic or environmental impacts on the local communities. In order to regain control over the platforms and tackle these issues, Scholz proposed the idea of “Platform Cooperativism” (Scholz, 2016) suggesting that if platforms were controlled by their users – organized in the form of a cooperative – most of the governance and social responsibility issues would be solved. Moreover, the shared ownership of the platform would also allow for a fairer distribution of the value produced to the people who actually created it, instead of handing it over to a restricted group of venture capital investors. Lastly, if the platform were a cooperative, it would also be an opportunity for strengthening solidarity and social ties among workers, fighting the tendency towards new forms of alienated on-demand employment.

Despite at present little practical evidence exists, the idea of platforms cooperatives is now spreading in Europe through the dissemination work carried out by Scholz (2014, 2015a, 2016) and Nathan Schneider (2015b), and has had in the past 2 years a certain degree of success, stimulating some debate among researchers and observers of the collaborative economy phenomenon.

Moreover, the platform cooperative debate seems for now to be focusing mainly on the need to democratize existing collaborative economy platforms, or fostering the birth of new “more democratic” ones. Less attention seems to be paid, instead, to the issue of how the collaborative economy could *transform existing cooperative businesses*, or how existing cooperatives could develop their *brand new collaborative models* driven by their specific innovation needs. This perspective, which focuses on the birth of collaborative innovations *from within* the cooperative movement, raises a number of important questions as to how cooperatives could incorporate new elements from the collaborative economy model, without losing their distinctive features and principles, and valorizing instead their acquired strengths in view of a better capacity to adapt to the changing socio-economic systems.

To our knowledge, except from the already mentioned research promoted by Unipolis Foundation in Italy, no other analysis has been proposed so far under this specific perspective. In order to verify the validity and potential of such an approach, there is need to better understand to what extents (and where, how, with what results, under what specific circumstance, etc.) cooperatives are already applying and adapting the collaborative economy on the ground. This is what we aimed to start with this first European exploratory study.

Finally, in order to avoid any confusion, we will only refer here to formally established cooperatives. This specification is, according to us, necessary at least at an initial stage of *analysis*, since the cooperative ownership model *is* indeed the focal point of the platform cooperative concept (i.e. cooperatives are an interesting option *because* they imply shared property and governance). Moreover, cooperatives show also other distinctive features (related to their peculiar history, the codification of their shared values and principles) that deserve specific attention in a reflection that considers cooperatives holistically.¹⁶

3. Exploring the state of the art and potential of the collaborative economy for cooperatives in the EU

Against the background explained above, the objective of this study is to highlight the challenges and potential of the collaborative economy for European cooperatives, and in particular to collect the direct voice of their representative associations on this topic.

This paper represents to our knowledge the first attempt of this kind, despite the fact that, as we have recalled in the previous sections, the interest is growing and some debate around the relationship between cooperativism and collaborative economy is starting to take momentum especially in the collaborative economy circles.

¹⁶ This issue has already been raised, as we have noted, by a recent article wrote by Joseph Davies Coats (2016) in response to a previous article appeared on the online journal "Shareable", which reported 11 cases of platform cooperatives including organizations that are not formally coops (Johnson, 2016).

For the empirical part of the study we engaged the representatives of national cooperative associations in 9 different EU member states, realizing semi-structured interviews to explore the research topic from an initial comparative and multi-country perspective.

In addition to this, we developed and launched an international online mapping survey in 3 languages to identify European cooperatives that are implementing innovations in the collaborative economy field. The survey, together with an accompanying desk review and a mobilization of territorial networks, provided a valuable tool to identify a broad range of collaborative economy initiatives born *inside* the cooperative movement, providing the basis for future research and innovation actions.¹⁷

In the following paragraphs, we present the main finding from the interviews with cooperative associations and the review of the first mapping results.

a. How the cooperative economy is perceived and approached by cooperatives organisations in EU members States

The study was open to the participation of all national cooperative associations present in Europe, focusing in particular on Cooperatives Europe's members. Top representatives (presidents and directors) of the associations were contacted and invited for an in-depth exchange on the topic, and 10 of them (representing 8 European countries), gave their availability. The countries represented (and corresponding associations involved) are: Austria (association: Österreichischer Genossenschaftsverband, ÖGV), Belgium (association: Febecoop), Czech Republic (association:

¹⁷ The survey is an ongoing tool for mapping and gathering empirical data, and will remain open in the future.

Družstevní Asociace České republiky, DACR),¹⁸ France (associations: CoopFR and CG Scop), Italy (associations: Legacoop and Confcooperative), Netherlands (association: NCR), Poland (association: KRS), and the UK (association: Co-operatives UK).¹⁹

The interviews addressed 5 broad research questions:²⁰

1. What is the understanding of the collaborative economy on the part of the national cooperative movements, and their general attitudes towards this emerging phenomenon?
2. What are the levels of awareness and knowledge of the collaborative economy among individual cooperatives at the ground level, and their degree of interest in terms of innovation potential?
3. What is the actual spread of innovative practices among the cooperatives? What key sectors and types of cooperative innovations are directly or indirectly being inspired by the collaborative economy?
4. What is the role of cooperative umbrella associations, in terms of promoting awareness, debate, and experimentation?
5. What are the key challenges, opportunities, and future paths for cooperatives in the collaborative economy field?

The study highlighted a very diverse situation in the different participating countries. Indeed, each country presents a different socio-economic context, a different history and configuration of the cooperative movement, and a different present landscape in terms of sectors, innovation trends, priorities, and attitudes of cooperatives towards the new forms of collaboration. Countries such as the UK, France, and Italy for example, have a long and renowned cooperative tradition and present a high number of cooperatives that are developed also in mature markets. In these countries, some cooperatives have reached a significant size (in terms of membership, turnover, employees), and

¹⁸ DACR created a connection with the association Alternativa Zdola specialised on cooperatives and collaborative economy.

¹⁹ In addition to these, a representative from the German association DGRV - Deutscher Genossenschafts- und Raiffaisenverband e. V. responded with a written questionnaire in view of a future deeper exchange.

²⁰ The interviews aimed at collecting the perspective and opinion and cannot be considered the official positions of the associations as a whole.

their innovation dynamics are influenced by the conditions of the different markets in which they operate. The situation is different in the former socialist countries, such as Poland and the Czech Republic, which have been confronted to structural challenges since the collapse of USSR. In these latter countries, cooperatives are struggling to retrieve a bigger role in society and in the national economic system, and the collaborative economy is perceived as an additional potential opportunity to foster social trust and promote a new collaborative culture, although the movement is not yet strong enough to embrace it immediately.

In the middle between these two opposite poles, stand other European countries with their diverse cooperative traditions and their specific challenges and opportunities. Moreover, in all countries analysed, there is also a clear difference between long established historical cooperatives, and younger cooperative startups, that are created by younger people who tend to have a higher capacity to exploit digital technologies and to be closer to the collaborative economy culture.

The high diversity that characterises the country contexts and the cooperative movements in the different member countries points to the need to avoid any generalizations when looking at how the collaborative economy concepts and practices are being received and eventually incorporated within existing systems at country level.

Overall, across the different countries, the interviews found a prevailing (though not universal) positive attitude of the interviewed associations towards the idea of developing innovation with the collaborative economy.

In the UK and France in particular, and then increasingly also in Belgium and in Austria, there is a growing awareness of the potential of the collaborative economy for cooperative companies, and a desire of representative associations to see cooperatives take the lead of this emerging phenomenon.

In France, the debate on the collaborative economy is growing fast as part of a broader debate on the social economy, a debate that is trying to redefine the borders of these concepts in a more open

and inclusive way. As Jean-Louis Bancel, President of CoopFR, put it: *“Collaboration and cooperation can take many forms, but we are all part of the same family and we should not fear the differences, rather we should include them and offer our distinctive (cooperative) solutions to tackle the critical issues of the collaborative platforms”*. Similarly and even stronger approach was expressed by E. Mayo Co-operatives UK Secretary General: *“It is a matter of survival”, “cooperatives will have to explore new paths of innovation if they want to be always competitive and continuously regenerate their model, to promote their values and principles, and play a leading role in the changed socio-economic context”*.

The collaborative economy is seen in these countries as an interesting novelty and an opportunity to develop much needed innovations in the cooperative sector. Indeed, even in the field of collaboration, which cooperatives have championed for long time (cooperatives have been the first type of enterprise to develop a specific model based on the principles of collaboration, participation, valorization of people and community assets, etc.) the collaborative economy is bringing about important transformations. As a consequence, according to these representatives, cooperatives should renew their models to adapt to changing times, and prevent a risk of losing ground and missing important opportunities. They stress an urgent need for cooperatives to catch up in particular with the new digital technologies and forms of sharing.

Put in these terms, the cooperative associations of these countries see a synergy between cooperatives and collaborative economy as not only possible but also highly desirable and almost inevitable. They further think that cooperative associations should act quickly to stimulate and support their members in this direction.

Interviewed cooperative associations from France and the UK are working actively on this topic. The French association CG Scop following the release of a report from the French Conseil National du Numérique-CNNuM, which highlighted the potential of cooperative platforms to

address collaborative economy's challenges (2016), gave birth to a specific work group with the aim to work on the practical promotion of innovative hybrid projects that apply the collaborative economy to cooperatives. The work group is now planning to build an accelerator of collaborative economy projects for cooperatives, and will eventually establish a first experimental project to create a prototype of platform cooperative that keeps together the key elements of the collaborative economy and the 7 principles of cooperation adopted by the International Cooperative Alliance.²¹ Similarly, Co-operatives UK is using its existing infrastructure to support the birth of platform cooperatives (for example through the Microgenius crowdfunding platform), and experimenting directly the use collaborative governance tools such as Loomio.²² In both countries, the associations feel the urgency to raise awareness among their members cooperatives in relation to this important matter, and are making an effort in this direction.²³

In Austria and Belgium the interviewed associations have started more recently but are being proactive on the topic. The Austrian cooperative association ÖVG reported that they are making important efforts to raise the interest of cooperative companies and is supporting the birth of new platforms in the cooperative form through the Crowdcoopfunding platform. The priority, according to the association, is to avoid that new platforms are born only in the limited company form, therefore there is need to make the cooperative option more known and appealing especially for young entrepreneurs. In Belgium as well there have been some initiatives promoted by the association Febecoop to communicate and promote collaborative practices among cooperatives, for example through the creation of a specific coworking space.

²¹ These are: Voluntary and Open Membership, Democratic Member Control, member Economic Participation, Autonomy and Independence, Education, Training and Information, Cooperation Among Cooperatives, and Concern for Community. The 7 principles, based on the historical Rochdale Principles set in 1844 by the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers, have been officially adopted by the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) in 1937, and the current version reported here derives from the last revision adopted by the ICA in 1995. They can be found on the website at <http://ica.coop/en/whats-co-op/co-operative-identity-values-principles>

²² Loomio is used by the Solid Fund, UK Workers' Cooperatives Solidarity Fund.

²³ The high participation achieved by a Platform Cooperatives session organised at the last Annual Cooperative Congress seems to prove the effectiveness of these efforts. According to our interviews, the UK is the country in which the collaborative economy topic is most known by cooperatives, and where the debate is more developed.

In other countries, such as Italy and the Netherlands, perceptions and attitudes of the cooperative associations towards the collaborative economy are more mixed, and the associations seem to be more cautious about some aspects of this phenomenon.

In Italy, for example, the association Legacoop interviewed for this study suggests that the cooperative movement should take a careful approach when considering the collaborative economy topic, in order to make a distinction between real sharing practices and disruptive on-demand markets. Considering the many controversial issues raised by the latter, the representative of Legacoop suggested that cooperatives should distance themselves from any platforms and practices that are found to be incompatible with cooperative principles, and prefer a dialogue with the most genuinely sharing experiences, which can also offer inspiration with regards to digital innovation. Similarly, the association Confcooperative with reference again to the Italian context, raises similar criticism in relation to the risks of large capitalistic on-demand platforms, and wishes for the birth of smaller, local, cooperative platforms from within the cooperative movement. To encourage this, Confcooperative started promoting some debate and training on the collaborative economy topic within its Coop Up project, which promotes cooperative startups across Italy. Some attempts to identify specific opportunities and raise interest among cooperatives have been made also in Italy also through the dissemination of the already mentioned pioneering study promoted in 2015 by the Unipolis Foundation and the youth group of Legacoop Generazioni. The research, titled “From the Sharing Economy to the Collaborative Economy: Impact and opportunities for the cooperative movement” (Como et al., 2015) raised awareness among cooperatives and started stimulating a debate that however has not yet become mainstream in the country.

In the Netherlands, the reasons for a cautious approach to the collaborative economy are different if not totally opposite from the Italian ones. The Association NCR, interviewed for this research, expressed appreciation for the collaborative economy phenomenon and for the birth of new social innovation initiatives, but expressed also some concern about the fact that many of the small, local platforms that are choosing to become cooperatives in the country, seem to be approaching the

cooperative model mainly for ideological and value reasons, failing to understand the economic dimension of being a cooperative in a competitive context. By focusing predominantly on the social aspects of cooperation, they tend to underestimate the importance of a sustainable business model, and therefore face a high risk of failure. The spread of these cooperative platforms, which certainly represent a positive sign of civic activation in the Netherlands, is a concern for the cooperative association interviewed as it may undermine the economic role of cooperatives and push them towards purely civic initiatives.

Lastly, in Poland and the Czech Republic, the debate on the collaborative economy is still starting to emerge. This is mainly due to the contextual factors that derive from the history and current transformations of these countries. In Poland, the interviewed association, KRS observed that the communist legacy left a generalised distrust of the population in the cooperative concept (which is still linked to the memory of past communist collectives); the predominant culture in the country seems to be individualistic, and the idea of private ownership of goods and assets is generally preferred over sharing or direct exchange with other citizens. He nonetheless also reported that the main global platforms (Airbnb and Uber in particular) are used by a growing number of younger people in Poland, who find them smart and convenient, without however identifying them with a “sharing” or “collaborative” concept. According to the perception of the interviewee, the country in general does not experience a debate, neither in positive nor in negative terms, about the collaborative economy, but he believes that a higher diffusion of these practices would be desirable, as it would bring a positive cultural change and contrast individualism and social distrust.

In the Czech Republic, on the other hand, after a period of social atomization following the end of the communist period, our interviewee observes that some forms of civic organization and collective action are now starting to gain ground again in the country, and there is some evidence of collaborative economy initiatives born on the ground. However, the debate on this topic is reported to be almost inexistent, and the collaborative economy tends to be overlooked by policymakers and

academics. Despite the interest of some bottom-up collaborative economy experiences in embracing the cooperative form, these are still small both in economic terms and in terms of membership, and the cooperative association is yet to take proactive actions in this field.

b. An overall picture of existing experiences and trends in the countries

Through our online mapping survey, and through the activation of relevant European cooperative networks, we collected empirical data on the emergence of these experiences on the ground. As mentioned, in order to focus on the dynamics that concern the cooperative movement, we decided to include in this mapping only established and formally recognized cooperative companies. Indeed, the aim here is to identify innovations taking place *within* the cooperative movement, or new initiatives that *opt* for a cooperative ownership model.²⁴ We have also included few projects that are developed by cooperative consortia, networks, or associations, and that act as internal instruments of the cooperative movement to promote innovation and startups that make use of the the collaborative economy model through a cooperative form.

To date, after screening for these characteristics, we have identified 38 cases that correspond to the requirements in 11 European countries,²⁵ plus 3 international initiatives that filled our survey from outside the EU.²⁶ The mapping has just started and we aim to reach more and more cooperatives in the future, across the EU, and potentially beyond.

The types of experiences found are very diverse and confirm the different ways in which cooperatives can use and adapt the collaborative economy principles to develop their own projects and businesses, in a distinctive cooperative form. Below we present a synthesis of the cases.

²⁴ This does not mean that other initiatives, and in particular those in the broader social economy sector, may not be of interest, also in terms of possible interactions with cooperatives and their collaborative economy projects.

²⁵ Italy, France, Spain, Belgium, Austria, Germany, UK, Portugal, Greece, Netherlands, Finland.

²⁶ North America (Canada and United States), Israel, international.

First of all, we should observe that over 80% (31 out of 38) of the collaborative economy initiatives done by cooperatives rely heavily on digital technology as a key enabling factor. This confirms the strong relationship between the collaborative economy and digital innovation. However, not all of these “digital coops” (as we may call them) are digital *platforms* stricto sensu, meaning that they have created an online space where their members (or users, because most times the platforms are used also by non-coop members) can exchange resources or realise some form of *horizontal* collaboration. Only in 60% of the total cases technology is used to realise such peer-to-peer collaboration, in line with the platform model.²⁷

Proper cooperative platforms are of different types. A common type are the car sharing platforms (for example the Belgian Partago, the Spanish Som Mobilitat, etc.). Another type are the cooperative platforms that facilitate matching for peer-to-peer support and services (examples are Wehelfen in Austria and La Spesa Social in Italy). One (Piacere Milano) matches hosts and guests and promotes forms of experiential tourism. Another one matches people who offer food in excess with people who may consume it (S-cambia), and so on we may continue with similar experiences in different sectors. These are generally very small platforms, which operate at local level and have a small number of users, nothing comparable with well-known giants such as Uber or Airbnb. Another area in which we found a few cases are the cooperative crowdfunding platforms, born to support the birth of new coops with digital engagement strategies; these are promoted directly by cooperatives (an example is the French Jefinanceunprojetcoopératif) or by cooperative consortia and representative associations (eg. Microgenius in the UK).

The collaborative economy projects that are “digital” but do not take the form of proper platforms, on the other hand, tend to make different uses of technology. Some use it to reach and engage people in social projects that entail different forms of sharing, but cannot be described as peer-to-

²⁷ This represents 75% of the 31 cases that we have already defined as “digital”.

peer collaboration. For example, the project Vesta developed by the Italian cooperative Camelot uses a digital platform to recruit families that want to host refugees in their houses, “sharing” their spare rooms with those who need them. The project is definitely “sharing”, and digital as well, but cannot be defined “peer-to-peer” between families and refugees, because of the role that the cooperative still plays through the delivery of its professional services. Indeed, the cooperative remains in charge of providing all the integration services to the refugee, of monitoring the results, training the families and so on, and (fortunately, in this case) we cannot at all talk about “disintermediation”.

Another way in which cooperatives can use technology to implement collaborative practices is by applying it to their internal governance systems, for strengthening and innovating participation of members and communities. It is the example of cooperatives using Loomio, or Backfeed, but also the example of the Community Platform of the Flora Royal Holland cooperative in the Netherlands. Moreover, there are cooperatives that thanks to the use of new technologies are innovating the experience of collective purchasing groups, and promoting new forms of solidarity and collective action.

Lastly, we referred to the existence of a number of initiatives that are not technological in their nature (around 20% of the cases mapped). These are mainly coworking and collaborative spaces promoted by cooperatives in different contexts, which confirm the importance of this kind of experiences and the interest of cooperatives in the creation of opportunities to be “physically together”. These are initiatives that meet the idea of collaboration and sharing but do not have technology at their core, although of course they may use technology in other ways.

Another interesting result of the mapping is that we could identify more than one example of collaborative economy projects developed by cooperatives to improve B2B relationships and sharing. This is particularly interesting if we think at cooperatives as a *movement*, as emphasised

also by the 6th cooperative principle stated by the International Cooperative Alliance (cooperation among cooperatives). An example of a B2B platform for cooperatives is the France Barter.

The high diversity of these experiences demonstrates once again the power of the collaborative economy concept as an inspiration for cooperative innovation. Most of the mapped cases correspond, however, to new cooperatives (start-ups) that are born within the collaborative economy movement. Only in a minority of the cases, pre-existing cooperatives have developed collaborative economy projects, although this is happening in some cases, especially among consumer cooperatives and social cooperatives.

In terms of industrial sectors, the most touched by the collaborative economy initiatives mapped are mobility, energy, tourism, finance, and food, although there are also other sectors and multisectoral initiatives, and many more may be identified by our mapping in the future.

Another interesting element that emerges from the mapping survey²⁸ is that only in 16% of the cases the cooperatives developed collaborative projects specifically for their members, while in 16% of the cases projects aimed also at members of other cooperatives, and in 68% collaborative services were meant for the broader public, open to everyone irrespective of their being or not being cooperative members.

Lastly, a significant number of cooperatives (32%) developed initiatives at the local level, 20% at the regional level, 24% aim to cover the national level, and 24% that aim at an international level. Overall, numbers of people actually reached so far are quite low. According to the numbers declared by the cooperatives involved, in 40% of the initiatives fewer than 100 people participated, in 30% of cases the users have been between 100 and 1000, in 9% of the cases between 1000 and

²⁸ The survey was filled by 23 cases, 60%.

5000, and in 9% of the cases over 5000 (reaching the peak of 100,000). This of course depends also on the type of initiatives (eg. coworking vs digital platform), and on their geographical ambition.

Although the mapping methodology²⁹ does not allow, especially on such limited numbers, to produce an objective picture of the phenomenon in Europe, we may already find in this empirical evidence some interesting elements for future analysis and continuous data collection.

c. Barriers, opportunities and open questions for the future

From this exploratory study we can highlight a number opportunities that may emerge from the application of the collaborative economy principles and tools to cooperative companies. These have been suggested by the exchange with the interviewees from different cooperative associations. They partly overlap and confirm the results emerged from the previous research carried out in Italy already mentioned at the beginning of this paper (Como et al, 2015), and partly add new elements that we deserve attention in future research.

First of all, cooperatives could develop their own collaborative platforms to **enable different types of collaboration and exchange between peers**. This research suggests that currently cooperatives prefer to create platforms that can be used by anyone and not just by coop members (which means that there is no actual correspondence between users and owners, as sometimes is assumed when we talk about “platform cooperatives”), but this would probably depend also on the type of platform and on the sectors in which it operates. A specific suggestion raised by cooperative representatives is to develop platforms for freelance workers, to facilitate and mutualise work in this growing but challenging sector. Other suggestions concerned the possibility to promote platforms based on non-monetary exchange and alternative currencies.

²⁹ The survey was disseminated online through Cooperatives Europe and LAMA’s networks, also with the support of the cooperative associations involved.

Secondly, cooperatives could use the new collaborative governance tools to improve their internal processes and to **increase/improve participation** and empowerment of their members. Indeed, although cooperative ownership gives people the formal right to participate to decision-making processes, in medium and large-sized cooperatives this is not as easy in practice. We have seen the cases of Loomio or Backfeed as examples of how digital technologies can propose new ways to tackle this challenge and facilitate the participation of large and distributed communities of members as well as stakeholders. Having the right e-governance tools would become particularly important in the case of platforms and digital cooperatives with high numbers of distributed members.

Thirdly, cooperatives could develop new models for **managing the commons**, which exploit the potential of digital technologies as suggested also by the “open cooperativism” movement. This would be an opportunity for cooperatives to play a bigger role in this area where they have already experimented with success in the past, and to pioneer new viable solutions to manage collective resources in an open and at the same time economically sustainable way.

Fourthly, cooperatives could look at the **collaborative production and open manufacturing** movements as an inspiration to think of new ways to mobilize distributed creativity. Moreover, in history a great number of agricultural cooperatives started enabling small producers to gather by sharing common facilities (olive-press, tractors and trucks, etc.etc.). Collaborative production in the manufacturing field has then a lot in common with the traditional cooperative DNA.

Lastly, they could develop new platforms for **collaboration and exchange among cooperatives**. These could be used to facilitate knowledge sharing, enable inter-cooperative exchange of resources and services, realize common projects and build national and international networks, ultimately

valorizing cooperatives' potential as a movement that counts over 130,000 enterprises in Europe (Ica.coop, 2016), in basically all economic sectors, with 127 million members, more than 4 million employees, and nearly €990 billion annual turnover (Cooperatives Europe, 2015). Inter-cooperative collaboration can largely benefit from the use of technologies, and from a “platform approach” that is now enabled by the use of digital technologies.

In all the possibilities mentioned above, the key element that generates the shift from current cooperative practices towards the new, so-called “collaborative” models is digital innovation. As one of the interviewees pointed out “digital innovation gives power to cooperatives’ mission”, because it allows to do more, better, and at a larger scale what cooperatives have been doing for a long time: mobilizing community resources, fostering people’s collaboration, promoting democratic governance and control.

However, there are a number of barriers that make these innovations and shift particularly challenging to implement.

One is the difficulty of established cooperatives to develop and incorporate this type of innovation. This is due to obvious difficulties in converting existing businesses,. As we have already highlighted, digital innovation and collaborative economy models tend to be more easily incorporated by younger cooperatives, therefore if we are to promote collaborative economy innovations there is a need to promote the birth of brand new cooperatives, born under this innovative logic. This requires that the cooperative model be better communicated and made more appealing to the youth, who will otherwise find their collaborative economy ventures under a different legal form.

Another barrier to the birth of new cooperatives is the lack of appropriate financial instruments to attract equity capital and long-term investments, which slows down innovation and creates a disadvantage compared to capitalistic competitors.

Another limit is the tendency of recently created cooperatives to remain local, small in size, and insufficiently interconnected. Technology would allow them as any other operator to work on a larger scale and to overcome the barriers of space and time, but cooperatives are attached to their territory (which is in many ways a strength and distinctive feature) and sometimes remain small and marginal on the market.³⁰ In the face of globalised collaborative economy markets this can become a weakness as it may become impossible for local cooperative platforms to resist the competition of large multinational platforms. Cooperatives would therefore need to scale up their size or build trans-local networks of interconnected cooperatives that can challenge the capacity of international competitors to penetrate their territories.

Another challenge concerns the difficulty to “copy” ideas and models from the collaborative economy platforms without making the mistake of exactly replicating what they are doing. There is a risk of copying the same mistakes and weakening the cooperative model if cooperatives are not able to preserve their distinctive features, such as indeed the bonding with local territories, the capacity to mutualise risks and benefits, the capacity to promote shared growth and long-term local development. For example, it has been observed that cooperatives could develop new platforms for freelance workers but they should on the other hand avoid to push all people to become freelancers, and on the contrary fight against the polarization and precarization of work which is a tendency of the on-demand economy. The preservation of democratic governance in potentially large scale cooperative platforms is also a complex challenge, as we should not assume that technology alone can be the answer.

Overall, the biggest challenge is to apply cooperative values online, and to operationalise cooperative principles (as defined by the International Cooperative Alliance) through new forms of cooperation that may be quite different from those used for the past couple of centuries.

³⁰ This is of course not the case of all cooperatives, indeed some cooperatives become national leaders in their respective markets.

4. Conclusions and implications for future research and policy

This exploratory research intended to propose a new perspective on the relationship between the cooperatives and the collaborative economy in Europe, by gathering the perceptions and opinions of representatives of the cooperative movement in different countries, and by collecting some initial evidence of how cooperatives on the ground are actually engaging with collaborative economy innovations. The final aim of this reflection is to identify any potential opportunities and challenges deriving from the application and adaptation of collaborative economy models in cooperatives, and from the development of new “collaborative practices” from within the cooperative movement.

The conclusions that we present here are based on the first ideas collected from our interviewees and review of empirical cases. They are not to be considered as official positions of Cooperatives Europe nor of the cooperative associations involved. Nor they are to be considered as the arrival point of a research process that has just started. The suggestions we present will necessarily need to be analysed more in detail, and supported by sound research to be assessed for their actual feasibility and desirability in practice; nonetheless, we believe they can provide a first interesting stimulus on this topic for the European research and policy community.

Overall, the considerations raised by this study suggest that cooperatives may potentially benefit from engaging with the collaborative economy phenomenon. In particular, by exploring its innovation potential, it was suggested that cooperatives may discover new interesting ways to update and transform some of their established features, to better fit the emerging developments at societal, market, and technological level.

As some cooperative leaders highlighted in this research, cooperatives would first of all benefit from a deeper understanding and reflection on the collaborative economy topic. In general terms, it seems important that cooperatives approach this topic soon, and in an open and proactive way. It was highlighted that cooperatives should look at the positive potential of the collaborative economy

phenomenon, and not fear it the even when it leads to the emergence of new, global competitors that use a “collaborative” language mainly for commercial purposes. Cooperatives have internal histories and resources which might allow them to build alternative models challenging such competitors, developing their new distinctive solutions that are in line with cooperative principles and fundamental values.

The cooperative movement, it was observed, has demonstrated the capacity to combine economic growth and impact with the capacity to promote significant forms of empowerment, participation, and social interconnectedness. These are an important asset in the collaborative economy model, and if cooperatives are able to valorise them also in digital ways, they may become their distinctive added value into this emerging movement. Cooperatives can indeed contribute to the collaborative economy with a new (new for the collaborative economy, not for cooperatives) idea of community that is based on membership rather than usership. Moreover, by valorising their widespread presence across Europe and beyond, it was suggested that cooperatives might also use the collaborative economy model to build large interconnected networks across the territories that challenge the collaborative economy incumbents.

Another area of opportunity and idea which emerged from the research is that cooperatives might also benefit from exploring more and deeper the potential of new concepts such as “collaborative production”, “collaborative learning and knowledge”, and new fields of development such as the area of the commons, where they can play an important role and contribute to sustainable social and economic development.

However, this preliminary study suggests also that a cooperative movement willing to fully invest the collaborative economy potentials may be confronted to a number challenges, for example:

- to raise awareness of the collaborative economy models and features and to understand the reasons and structural basic conditions for its success;

- to encourage existing cooperatives to exploit the potential of digital and web technologies to update and upgrade their internal participation patterns;
- to support the development of new cooperatives setting up financial, technical and strategic support schemes at national and EU level;
- to set up relevant frameworks to pilot solutions, evaluate results and replicate successes fostering at the same time an open and distributed discussion aimed at balancing the presence of the sole “capitalist-based collaborative economy” narrative.

The relevance of the opportunities that seem to emerge from this initial scoping of the topic, and the complexity of the challenges that accompany them, suggest that more research is needed in this area, to better understand emerging dynamics and possible ways forward.

At the same time, this study suggests that there would also be room to stimulate the EU at institutional level, to consider the possible role of the cooperative legal form into peer-to-peer commercial markets. Cooperatives can match democracy, transparency, local and global impact, employment regulation, consumer safety and redistribution “by form”, with the power of a digital, user friendly, attractive and effective environment typical of the collaborative economy business models. Moreover, from governance to learning platforms, and considering the wide world of non-commercial sharing activities in many way based on – or fostered by – digital social platforms, an even bigger space of opportunities could be opened up by looking at the possible contribution of cooperatives.

Lastly, the promotion of a collaborative-cooperative economy, deeply enrooted in local territories and combining economic opportunities with social and democratic values, may possibly represent also a valuable path for the EU institutions to strengthen reputation among citizens, and to effectively pursue the objective of a smart, sustainable, and inclusive growth, ultimately improving wellbeing, social cohesion and security in Europe.

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