

SOCIETAL RELEVANCE OF COOPERATIVES

In both EU and Third Countries (TCs), cooperatives contribute to socio-economic development, support employment growth, and sustain a more balanced redistribution of wealth. In most countries, cooperatives have responded more effectively to the crisis than investor-owned firms. The resilience of cooperatives has increasingly been acknowledged, and policy and opinion makers are eager to understand how cooperatives can play a role in tackling the dramatic consequences of the global crisis and reforming the system that has contributed to generating it. The attention recently paid to cooperatives and related organizations by social networks, the media, and international organizations highlights this growing awareness.

However, in spite of their importance, cooperatives have not yet received the attention they deserve. As highlighted by numerous INT.RE.COOP researchers, the basic reason for this neglect has been a widespread conformism in interpreting the functioning of the economy, despite the increasingly inability of conventional economic theory to explain major events affecting contemporary societies.

INT.RE.COOP project succeeded in setting up a stable and consolidated international network of researchers devoted both to investigating the role of cooperatives in the economy and society and to improving their understanding and visibility. Researchers seconded to EU/AC (Belgium, Italy, Spain, Serbia) and TCs (Armenia, Mexico, Argentina, Chile) explored cooperative enterprises from a variety of disciplinary perspectives with a view to filling gaps in the literature and also informing policy makers on how to create a more conducive environment for cooperatives. Thanks to the research conducted during their secondments, INT.RE.COOP researchers had a role in promoting a better understanding of the role of cooperatives in countries where the potential of this form is far from being fully harnessed (Latin American countries and the CIS) and helped investigate the contributions and limitations of cooperatives in diverse economic fields, including the supply of public utilities; the creation of work opportunities for dismissed workers; the delivery of personal and community services; credit; and agriculture.

MAIN SCIENTIFIC RESULTS

Twenty-three secondments were overall carried out in the frame of the INT.RE.COOP project, which enabled beneficiaries to interact with other cooperative scholars, discuss their in-progress research and present preliminary findings to competent audiences.

INT.RE.COOP contributed to bridging the gap between the societal relevance of cooperatives and the scarce attention paid to cooperatives by the social sciences and enabled researchers to advance their methodological skills and theoretical understanding of the rationale, evolutionary dynamics and impact of cooperatives.

The data gathered and reports delivered in the frame of the INT.RE.COOP project contribute to overcoming the scarcity of studies that characterize history, trajectory, present and future challenges of the cooperative sector in Latin America (Chile, Argentina, and Mexico). INT.RE.COOP research findings also have a role in highlighting the unexpressed potential of cooperatives in countries like the CIS (e.g. Armenia), where cooperatives are still perceived by the large public as a relict of the Soviet regime.

More specifically, thanks to the interaction with researchers from hosting institutions and the supervision of competent scholars in the case of early-stage researchers, seconded scholars:

- mapped the cooperative phenomenon in selected TCs (Armenia, Argentina, Chile, Mexico) through the collection of relevant data on the size, sectors of engagement, eco-system (including legal frameworks and support measures where in place) and obstacles preventing a balanced development of cooperatives.
- contributed to the development of adequate indicators assessing the social and economic impact of cooperatives;
- explored the role and potential of cooperatives in specific policy areas and/or economic sectors;
- investigated legal, policy, and organizational aspects in US, Canada, and selected EU countries.

Fig. 1 – Seminar at the University of Saskatchewan, Canada



Fig. 2 – Seminar at the National University of La Plata, Argentina



Fig. 3 – Field work at “Officine Zero-CLAP”, Rome, Italy



Two main conferences provided INT.RE.COOP researchers the opportunity to meet with colleagues from partner institutions and actively participate in the debate on the role of cooperatives in contemporary economies with a wider international audience of scholars, policy makers and practitioners.

- Conference “Promoting the Understanding of Cooperatives for a Better Agricultural Development in Armenia”, co-organized by ICARE and UNDP-Armenia with the collaboration of Euricse and the University of Almeria that was held in Yerevan, Armenia on the 10th of October 2012 (programme enclosed);
- Special session devoted to the findings of the INT.RE.COOP project at the International Research Conference “New strategies for co-operatives: Understanding and managing co-operative creation, transition and transformation” co-organized by the International Co-operative Alliance and the University of Almeria, with the collaboration of Euricse (programme available at: <http://www2.ual.es/ica2016almeria/programme/>).

Fig. 4 – Conference in Yerevan, Armenia



Fig. 5 – Conference in Yerevan, Armenia



Fig. 6 – Conference in Almeria, Spain



INT.RE.COOP SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT

Besides contributing to a needed update of data and information about cooperatives, INT.RE.COOP also developed targeted recommendations that address the research community, public authorities, cooperative movements, and international donors, including EU institutions. While being inspired by the barriers faced by cooperatives in the countries covered by INT.RE.COOP study, recommendations can nevertheless be addressed to cooperatives in general, in both EU and TC.

The first set of recommendations concerns the adoption of both **consistent regulations** that allow for the exploitation of cooperatives' competitive advantages and support policies that facilitate their start-up, expansion, and consolidation. The second set of recommendations regards the **development of a consistent management culture** incorporating the values and principles of cooperatives. The third set of recommendations involves specific measures and actions for supporting a better understanding of the rationale of cooperatives and **increasing their visibility as institutions fulfilling key economic and social roles**.

Some of the recommendations concerning the adoption of consistent regulations have already been successfully transposed by the legislation on agricultural cooperatives that has been introduced in 2015 in the Armenian legal system thanks to the lobby activity of INT.RE.COOP Armenian partner (Law No. ZR-190 on agricultural cooperatives, approved by the National Assembly of the Republic of Armenia on the 21st of December 2015).