

Editorial

# The Agricultural Cooperative in the Face of the Challenges of Globalization, Sustainability and Digitalization

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The enormous contribution of agricultural cooperative societies to the rural world has not gone unnoticed. This is corroborated by many international entities such as the International Cooperative Alliance, COPA-COGECA, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC), the United Nations Inter-Agency Working Group on Social and Solidarity Economy and CIRIEC International. The International Cooperative Alliance estimates that 12% of the world's population is linked to one of the 3 million cooperatives that exist worldwide, most of them linked to rural areas. Therefore, cooperative societies are not a marginal phenomenon.

In relation to the role played by agricultural cooperatives in the world, it should be stated that the agricultural cooperative is an enterprise unconditionally and stably linked to the rural environment, to the farmer and the stockbreeder. For this reason, it plays a leading role in the local economy and in the fixation of the population to the territory, thus contributing to the balance and management of the territory, which makes the cooperatives true agents of rural development. On the other hand, cooperative societies have been the guarantors of the structuring of agriculture in rural areas in many countries. These organizations constitute the main structured, organized, professionalized and stable network established throughout the territory, in contact with the rural environment, with the capacity to communicate with and influence farmers and stockbreeders. They directly or indirectly provide much of the employment in the rural world, and cooperative societies by nature develop their activity under cooperative principles and values that make them exponents of socially responsible enterprises. They can therefore be seen as the key to sustainable development as promulgated by the United Nations through the SDGs.

The aim of this Special Issue has been to highlight the importance of agricultural cooperatives in the face of the challenges of globalization, sustainability and digitalization in rural areas. The contributions made to this issue apply to different products, sectors and regions around the world. Below is a summary of these 10 contributions, which are of great interest and topicality.

The efficiency of dairy cooperatives and non-cooperatives in Poland has been evaluated [1]. The results show that, assuming constant returns to scale, dairy cooperatives are technically less efficient than non-cooperatives, while, assuming variable returns to scale, these differences are not statistically significant. Such findings reveal that the technical efficiency of dairy farms in Poland is not differentiated by regional milk production potential. It is recommended to improve the technical efficiency of dairies through the process of consolidation.

Another study develops a micro-meso-macro and territorial evolutionary theoretical framework to study SSE-driven transformation in the sugarcane cluster of Veracruz (Mexico) [2]. The main findings of the article are that the SSE drives the beneficiaries, while the protagonists of the transformation cannot be defined a priori but are shaped by vectors of transformation promoted by the SSE: its values shared by a broad spectrum of actors, the socioeconomic and organizational specificities of the SSE, and its rootedness in the



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productive system. The fundamental conclusion of the article is the need for a “territorial approach” to SSE impact, as opposed to the dominant “stakeholder-driven approach”.

On the other hand, the process of a cooperative merger and its relevant role in the development of these organizations has been investigated [3]. Specifically, the economic, socio-cultural, organizational and process management factors underlying merger processes that fail have been identified: some are aborted at the negotiation stage and others are not approved by the members. The results reveal that, far from being economic factors, defensive localisms, lack of commitment to the merger on the part of partners and directors and communication failures are the most significant factors.

It has also been analyzed whether trust influences the functioning of various forms of collective entrepreneurship in rural Poland [4]. The research shows: the superior role of personal trust over institutional trust in the emergence and functioning of the studied forms of collective entrepreneurship in rural areas; the greater importance of social rather than economic factors in determining the functioning of rural collective entrepreneurship; the positive impact of generalized trust on the trust placed in the forms of entrepreneurship covered by the analysis; the increase of trust over the time of cooperation; and the impact of trust on the functioning of collective entrepreneurship, both in the economic and social dimensions, with a slight advantage of the latter.

Other researchers assess the level of willingness to cooperate among small farmers in Lithuania and elaborate the profiles of small farms that participate and intend to join cooperatives and, conversely, that do not participate in cooperatives and do not intend to do so [5]. The results show that only 8% of the surveyed farms participate in producer groups or cooperatives, while another 8% intend to participate. Small-scale farms in Lithuania have weak market integration, with no bargaining power in input and output markets. The vast majority of small-scale farms are reluctant to participate in cooperative activities in Lithuania. Thus, the main economic factors of farms and social characteristics of managers willing to cooperate are identified.

Another study estimates the factors associated with municipal participation in cooperative membership (MSCM) in Brazil and how the value of production at the municipal level changes with MSCM [6]. The results show that higher education and smaller ownership size are associated with membership in agricultural cooperatives in Brazil. We also estimate how MSCM is associated with agricultural earnings.

The importance of digitalization is also addressed. Specifically, another study identifies which organizational characteristics are directly related to the popularity of Argentine beekeeping organizations in social networks, measured by the number of followers in their accounts [7]. The results show that, beyond the use of Facebook itself, the best organizational practices are associated with factors linked to the cooperative nature of the organization, its localization, environmental sensitivity and its presence on other digital platforms.

Other researchers analyze four rural tourism sites in the suburbs of Chengdu to analyze the influence of farmers’ self-identity on their intention to behave responsibly towards the land under multifunctional agricultural perception conditions as variable mediation [8]. The results show that in rural tourism destinations in suburban districts of China farmers’ self-identity is an important variable affecting their intention of responsible land behavior. Moreover, the perception of agricultural economic function mediates the relationship between farmers’ self-identity and the behavioral intention of land responsibility.

Another study estimates the monetary value of a policy aimed at increasing rural cooperative production in Kazakhstan in order to increase milk production [9]. It analyzes the factors associated with public support for such a policy. In addition, changes in people’s WTP before and during the CO-VID-19 pandemic are examined. Among the results obtained, it is shown that psychological factors, i.e., attitude, perceived social pressure and perceived behavioral control, and respondents’ awareness of the policy and opinions about the Soviet Union regime are associated with their willingness to pay; sociodemographic

factors, namely, age, income and education, are also statistically significant; finally, the effect of COVID-19 fear is negatively associated with respondents' willingness to pay.

To conclude, another study analyzes the level of digitization of the European agri-food cooperative sector based on the construction of a composite synthetic index [10]. The results of the study reveal the existence of a suboptimal and heterogeneous degree of digitization of European agri-food cooperatives, clearly conditioned by their size and the wealth of the country where they operate. The authors recommend promoting public policies that guarantee high-performance digital connectivity, improved training in digital skills and the promotion of cooperative integration processes.

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