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Cooperatives enterprise, incubators for the co-design of a new organizational and management model for sustainable development.

Caterina Rosini^{*a}, Silvia Barbero^a,

^aPolitecnico di Torino

*caterina.rosini@polito.it

Abstract | In the global economic context, cooperative enterprises have a considerable impact, with approximately one billion people worldwide estimated to be members of cooperatives (ICA e International Cooperative Alliance, 2015). In the historical evolution of the cooperative enterprise, they were born progressively, different typologies according to the most emerging collective problems (Depedri & Turri, 2015). However, the profound changes in the socio-economic context have expanded the emerging social needs, resulting in greater complexity that has challenged the established resilience of cooperatives. This complexity has led to the creation of a study based on the approach of Systemic Design (SD). Thanks to the primary tool of SD, the Holistic Diagnosis (HD), is possible to determine the current scenario and its complexity. The first phase of analysis of the context of reference is viewed from multiple points of view, such as economy, society, demography, and culture to identify strengths. With this background, the aim of this study is to define the first basis to design a new organizational model for social cooperatives, in the Italian context, to face the actual fluid situation. Specifically, the study highlights the cooperatives hidden potentialities to improve the structure of the organization and provide effective answers within the economic context. The HD is the first step to develop new organizational model for cooperative enterprises to be replicated on similar business models. To reach this goal a literature review is settle to highlight the actual gaps and a case study is analyzed in depth in order to obtain original data and validate the first hypothesis.

KEYWORDS | SOCIAL COOPERATIVES, HOLISTIC ANALYSIS, ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES, SYSTEMIC DESIGN

Introduction

In Europe, the term social enterprise refers to those enterprises defined as organisations whose mission is to produce goods and services to meet the needs of local communities, social groups and people, sometimes in fragile conditions. In every European region, these enterprises have different definitions and frameworks, some studies have investigated the birth and development of this type of enterprise (Borzaga & Santuari, 1999; Barr, 1992).

However, the main reasons behind the birth of social enterprises can be identified in:

- market crises due to the lack of homogeneity of information between producers and consumers; social enterprises offer an alternative to government-led interventions by creating a more socially embedded, equitable economy (Ridley-Duff & Bull, 2015).
- inability of the welfare state to meet the needs of public services; social enterprises sell or offer social services, programs, and/or products to fulfil human needs, by addressing the social problems that humans face (Rasheda, 2019).
- Individuals and/or groups of people who take actions to meet their ethical, ideological or religious aims (Hansmann, 1980; Weisbrod, 1975; Costa, 2012).

The distinction between social enterprise and social cooperative has been the subject of different studies (Defourny, Nyssens & Brolis 2018; Linzalone, 2013; Chell, Nicolopoulou & Karataş-Özkan, 2010). The International Cooperative Alliance (ICA), whose task is to promote and strengthen autonomous cooperatives around the world, has come up against the difficulty of defining uniquely the form of the cooperative so as to reconcile all experiences on a global level (Vella, 2010). The first univocal definition was profiled at the 1996 Manchester Congress with the following description: "an autonomous association of people who come together voluntarily to meet their economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations through the creation of a jointly owned, democratically controlled enterprise". At the legislative level, cooperatives have been officially recognized in the European Union by Article 48 of the *Trattato di Roma*, which defined them as a specific type of "company". From this moment on, each member state has designed regulatory frameworks to protect the interests of members and third parties.

Among all the member states, Italy was the first to create *ad hoc* legislation to regulate this type of enterprise (Kerlin, 2006). With the law n.381/1991 art.7, the Italian normative defined social cooperatives as non-profit entities subject to an advantageous tax regime with the aim of "pursuing the general interest of the community to the human promotion and social integration of citizens". More in detail, Law 381/1991 distinguishes three types of social cooperatives: 1) Type A social cooperatives dealing with the management of social and health services, education, and cultural activities; 2) type B social cooperatives, which have the objective of introducing "disadvantaged individuals" into the world of work (at least the 30% of the cooperative's workers); 3) Type C social cooperatives represent a category made up of consortia of social cooperatives. The consortia may have different characteristics, of mutuality, territorial, cross-sector and experimentation for activities in new cooperative sectors (Borzaga, 1996; Borzaga & Janes, 2011).

In general, in Italy social cooperatives, even if they are not the predominant form of enterprise, still play an important role within the national economic context. According to the Euricse (European Research Institute on Cooperatives and Social Enterprises) report which examines both sectoral differences and the economic situation in national context, the number of social cooperatives in Italy is about 14,000. Although the Euricse survey is among the most accurate, it remains difficult to make a clear distinction between type A and type B cooperatives. However, to date, the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) remains the main source for making historical comparisons between data, to frame with growth percentages, the phenomenon of social cooperatives in Italy, for example, referring to ISTAT data we know that in 2015 working cooperatives and social cooperatives had generate the most value added of whole cooperative sector equal to 73%. The strong growth of social cooperatives is partly due to legal regulation and partly to the growing demand for welfare services both from the community and from the individual founders of social enterprises (Galera & Borzaga, 2009). In this regard, to correctly frame the flowering of these enterprises it is important to underline how towards the end of the twentieth century in Italy there was a crisis of the welfare state that had become inefficient and state centred. In this period of economic and social crisis, cooperative enterprises began to flourish. Thanks to their social mission, cooperatives became the answer to market and government failures, which were mainly due to budget cuts that led to an increase in unemployment with a subsequent growing economic disparity and an increase in people at risk of poverty and social exclusion (Riva & Garavaglia, 2016). In this context, the strength of cooperatives lies in their ability to promote an alternative model of growth and development to that commonly adopted by for-profit companies. The alternative model translates into the creation of opportunities for economic and social inclusion and the ability to adapt political decisions to the interests and values of stakeholders (Linzone & Lerro, 2014; Kerlin 2006). Moreover, there is a large part of the literature that has highlighted the factors related to the resilience of social cooperatives (Cecop-Cicopa Europe, 2010; Euricse, 2015; Depedri, 2010). The human capital, among other factors, is a key element for the success of social enterprises. Indeed, much research has shown that workers in social cooperatives show greater commitment and loyalty. These elements translate into lower turnover but a high organizational effectiveness and productivity (Carpita & Golia S., 2012; Becchetti, Castriota & Tortia, 2013). In recent years, in order to withstand competition in the market with other types of companies, there has been increasing diversification within social cooperatives, which contributes to the development of multidisciplinary in terms of both professionalism and services offered (Euricse, 2015). On one hand, this multidisciplinary has contributed to increasing the resilience of cooperatives in the economic context, making them capable of facing and resisting the current economic crisis; on the other hand, a more varied composition, and a continuous drive for innovation in the organization flows allow a better adaptation to the social changes underway. Moreover, the merging capacity, the strengthening and renewal of the supply chains have contributed to increase productivity and competitiveness in this sector. In agreement with Shaw E. and Carter S. (2007) we can state that social cooperatives have been identified as an innovative model to address

emerging socio-economic needs. However, despite the positive aspects, some research and studies also explain the difficulties that social cooperatives have had to face in the process of affirmation (Linzone & Lerro, 2014; Thomas, 2004). Nevertheless, type B social cooperatives enjoy an advantageous tax regime, the outsourcing of public social services from social enterprises and the reduction of their budget are threatening the prosperity of cooperatives. Some studies have identified as major problems perceived by cooperatives: (i) the difficulty of opening to the market and becoming more independent from the public sector; (ii) the decrease in public procurement contracts by public authorities contributes to increased competition on cost-effectiveness by forcing cooperatives out of the market; (iii) the difficulty of obtaining financing and late payments by clients (Euricse, 2014; Riva & Garavaglia, 2016). Although in the past, social cooperatives have been fully able to respond to social needs, in the current context characterized by a strong complexity and also by a progressive reduction of resources, they are increasingly called upon to respond to new and particular needs (Linzone & Lerro A., 2014; Depedri & Turri, 2015).

In this framework, the present paper aims to study the current situation of Italian cooperatives not only in terms of growth and in terms of development, as already discussed in the literature through statistical, qualitative and quantitative studies. Rather, we want to investigate in deeper the internal organization and the problems related to the management of human and material resources. To this purpose, we will use the Systemic Design (SD) approach, an alternative business and design model able to provide interconnected solutions to the typical complexity of current situations, without neglecting social, environmental, and economic contexts. The analysis is strengthened from a real case study, a cooperative in Northern Italy, in order to work with primary and original data, like the historical evolution, the sectors of activity, the internal structure and the organizational flows of the work, and so on. The first step in the SD methodology is the Holistic Diagnosis (HD) to map the current scenario in all its complexity. Since the HD requires a deep level of detail, we decided to start with a single case study to use it as a reference to develop the analysis of other comparative case studies in the future, especially outside of Italy in order to have a more European scenario. The result that the study wants to achieve is to understand what are the critical issues in the current organizational model of the social cooperative, with respect to the new needs of the economic and social context. Once the criticalities of the current model and the needs of the reference context have been identified, we will proceed with the SD methodology in order to design a new model of social enterprise organization that can be replicated also on other similar realities. A fundamental aspect is also to facilitate the birth of new synergies that can involve not only public administrations but also private subjects, single citizens, or companies. The limits of the research are mainly related to the difficulty of finding all the data necessary to carry out an accurate mapping of the cooperative under examination. In fact, the cooperative in question has been in business for 30 years and has gone through many different phases that have brought with them changes in human resources and activities. In addition, there is another difficulty in obtaining information on the organisational flows of the work due to defined but not so rigidly defined roles within the cooperative as in a for-profit company, which makes the

changeover and maintenance of information more dispersive. However, we feel that by applying the SD methodology we could make a significant contribution in the innovating sector. We aim to increase knowledge about social cooperatives as an innovative business model aimed at meeting the emerging needs of today's society and to develop a new organizational strategy that meets both economic growth and workers' needs.

Method

For many years, there has been a concern to understand the growth of social cooperatives and their development in different territories. Some research has adopted qualitative methods to explore the co-evolution of social enterprises and the welfare state in Italy (Testi, Bellucci & Biggeri, 2017; Corbie, 2012). Different methods have been proposed to assess the economic benefits that these enterprises are able to achieve (Kohonen, 2012; Arogyaswamy, 2017; Cordes, 2017; Gordon, Wilson & Tonner, 2018). However, given the strong growth and development of social cooperatives and because of the difficulty in finding financing for their activities, impact assessment has become a much more discussed topic in recent years. In fact, quantitatively assessing the social impact of a cooperative can serve both the financiers, as a basis for evaluation, and the social enterprises themselves, to understand if their work is working and if it meets its objectives. The literature has developed a lot on this issue, applying different methodologies, for example, the activities and outputs created (i.e. jobs, tangible products, cost reduction...) have been examined and evaluated as main indicators of benefit delivery or results (Olsen & Galimidi, 2009). Then there are approaches such as Social Return on Investment (SROI) and Blended Value Accounting that seek to combine financial value with social value to define a single parameter that represents the company as a whole (Kroeger & Weber, 2015). Therefore, we want to try to go beyond the evaluation of the most easily measurable or immediate results (Arogyaswamy, 2017), because these types of evaluation have a big limit in the field of social cooperatives, and especially type B social cooperatives: it is not always possible to give back the results of an activity in monetary terms. For example, the inclusion of a disadvantaged person in the labour market can be evaluated in economic terms as a monetary amount saved to the state for the economic support of that individual. However, being able to assess how long the individual will remain in the labour market or whether or not he or she will have negative effects is not taken into account. In relation to this, it is therefore useful to ask whether it is no longer necessary for type B social cooperatives to talk about social impact monitoring rather than evaluation.

According to what has been described, in the current framework of cooperative enterprises there is a fair degree of complexity both in terms of what to assess and how best to assess it. The aim of the paper is to investigate through SD the complexity of the relationships between the company, the workers and the results achieved, finally defining a new system based on social, environmental and economic sustainability. The SD is an alternative design approach able to provide interconnected solutions to the complexity that characterizes the current situations, including in this process also the economic, social, and environmental contexts (Battistoni, Giraldo Nohra & Barbero, 2019). For our study and for the promotion of

an even stronger social cohesion and flourishing of local economies, the SD intervenes with the HD. The HD is an analysis process that determines the context of the system, considering both the quantitative and qualitative characteristics of the scenario under examination. Through the data collected through HD, problems and levers for change are identified. The next step will then be to define guidelines for co-designing a new system whose results are accessible and understandable to all stakeholders.

The HD, applied to our case study, is divided into two steps: the first involves in-depth analysis of the cooperative's internal relations and its operational context; the second is divided into top-down and bottom-up analysis to map the relationships with the entire value chain. Initially, we proceed to analyse the current organizational forms of workflows and the policies in place, the basic activities in the cooperative's sectors of reference and, finally, we identify all the potentialities that can be stimulated to promote sustainable development.

Specifically, phase 1:

We analyse the cooperative enterprise from its birth and historical evolution, then we examine the organizational structure from multiple points of view: workers' composition by age, cultural and economic dimension, scope of intervention. The data are collected directly at source thanks to the collaboration with the cooperative under examination and with its members. The information collected shows that the co-operative has most workers with fixed-term contracts and the majority are of Italian nationality; in fact, only 13% of the workers are of foreign origin (Fig.1). The average age of the workers is quite high, more than half of them are over 50 years old, and this factor has been identified as an influential aspect in the cooperative's capacity for growth and development. Having an older workforce implies greater difficulties in implementing internal changes especially about the digitalisation of processes and the transfer of knowledge. Most of the workforce is male, but this is due to the types of work carried out which often require greater physical strength but in no way attributable to discriminatory issues (Fig.2). In this context, the most important factor is the type of people the co-operative hires to fulfil its social mission. A 30% of the workers fall into the category of "socially disadvantaged people", which according to Italian law includes ex-prisoners, ex-alcoholics, and people with past drug addictions or in recovery, people with physical and mental disabilities. A peculiarity of the co-operative in question with respect to other co-operatives of the same type is that it chooses among disadvantaged people those who do not have any kind of work experience. In this framework, it is necessary to point out how much the social mission can influence and, in some ways, slow down the development of the organisation. Often these people are trained with the aim of making them acquire knowledge and skills useful for the job, but very often, they cannot sustain career transitions to roles that require responsibility. For the initial phase of historical analysis, interviews were carried out with the president of the cooperative and with the older members. For the organizational flows, information was collected through interviews with the department managers (Gardeners, Cemeteries, Selected waste collection) and took part in the weekly meetings in which the problems faced during the week were brought out. In this way, the designer has an immediate feedback on the validity of the data.

Once phase 1 is finished, it is necessary to frame the potentialities for the development and change of the cooperative and to do so it is essential to move on to phase 2: top-down and bottom-up analysis. In this phase, we proceed to map all the relationships with the stakeholders involved to identify the strengths and weaknesses on which to work together. HD requires a high degree of detail, fundamental to map and understand the intrinsic complexity of the study context. According to the HD results an high dependence from public institutions emerged, tangled relations with employment office for workers recruitment and internal resistance to change especially in the management sector.

CASE STUDY

Social Cooperative - Agridea

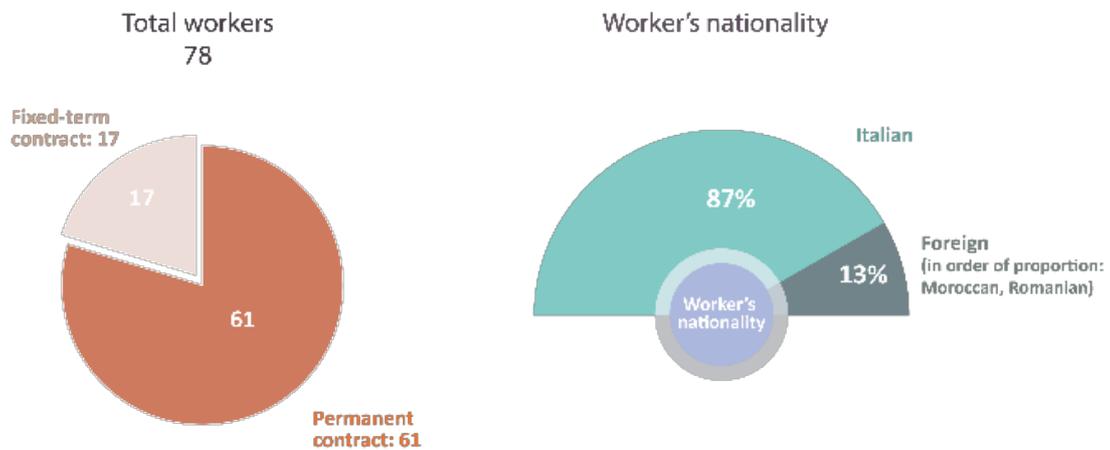


Fig. 1 type of contract and workforce nationality

CASE STUDY

Social Cooperative - Agridea

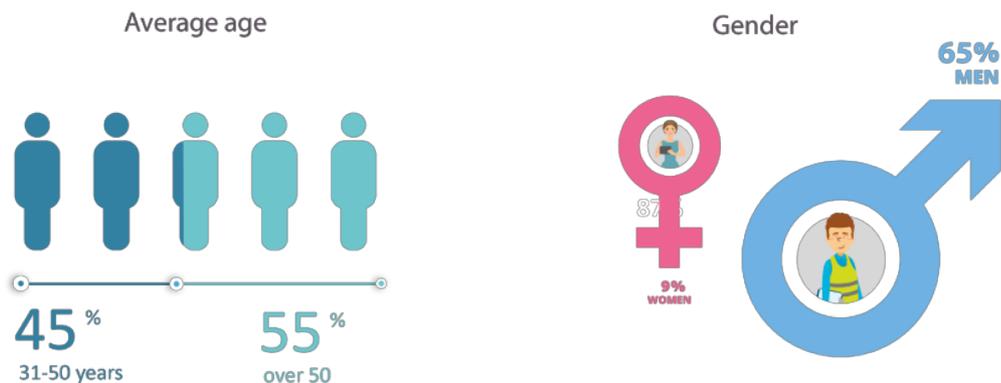


Fig.2 Workforce composition

Case Study

The type B social cooperative, Agridea is based in Turin. It was founded in 1992, following the publication of Law 381 of 1991, as a spin-off of another social cooperative called Stranidea. The initial sector of activity concerned the management and maintenance of green areas and there were five social workers in total. In 1993, the management of cemetery services was included, and so the second sector of activity was born. However, the first important development was in 1995 when Agridea was entrusted by the city of Turin with the management of urban green areas with a 2-year contract. Thanks to this first contract, the cooperative can obtain loans that it will use to buy the necessary equipment and to train its workers after this first big leap, the intention to create a more structured organization begins to manifest itself. In 2005, in collaboration with a Consortium, Agridea started to test the separated waste collection from the markets. The cooperative has grown significantly; to date it has about 70 workers and dependent members of which 30% are disadvantaged, as required by legal regulations. The governance model adopted by the cooperative is a traditional one, i.e. there is a board of directors, in this case represented by the president, vice-president and director, and a Board of Statutory Auditors, which supervises the work of the administrative body. The analysis of the organisational structure has shown that Agridea adopts a hierarchical model, which today is found almost exclusively in companies of minimum size. This model is functional thanks to the speed of transmission of orders and the transparency and clarity of relations. However, this organisation makes difficult the specialisation and the creation of "key roles".

Results and discussion

The growth of social cooperatives throughout Europe has gone hand in hand with the evolution of social problems. In Italy, too, this phenomenon has triggered a growing development of this type of enterprise. The SD approach with HD, promotes a multidisciplinary approach that brings together different stakeholders from different levels of the cooperative (managerial, operational, collaborative contacts with external bodies...) and provides the starting point to establish an innovative co-design. From the first part of the HD emerged a strong ability of Agridea to reinvent and develop itself in a quite autonomous way. In fact, since the birth of Agridea (1992), analysing its historical evolution, two years of economic loss have emerged, one in 2006 and one in 2010. The losses have always been absorbed in a maximum of two years and all sectors of activity have been maintained. This fact can be summed up in a good ability on the part of the management sector to manage difficult situations and to be able to recover. At the same time, we point out that in both years of crisis, all the workers remained in Agridea, no one resigned or was dismissed, a factor that shows a strong link on the part of the employees with the cooperative reality, which in turn contributes to strengthening the resilience of the cooperative. Another aspect that emerges is Agridea's willingness and ability to structure its

office staff in a more hierarchical way and with better defined roles, in the last few years this has improved the difficulties in managing the three sectors of activity: gardeners, cemeteries and selected waste collection. While on the one hand the hierarchical approach allowed a better management of tasks and work, on the other hand it contributed to a centralisation of responsibilities especially in the sector heads. This has led the co-operative to have a strong dependence on the people who incorporate these roles and who have become "indispensable" for the proper functioning of the whole organisation. Initially, what appeared to be an already consolidated organisation, HD brought to light the most hidden criticalities (Fig.3). When looking in detail at the organisation of a single sector, critical points emerged in the various areas. For example, the sector leaders must deal with the management system and the preparation of the daily programme according to the work to be carried out. The management system requires digital skills, which the managers have acquired through training. This training has not been extended to other workers who could potentially replace the current sector managers, so the co-operative does not currently have people capable of replacing the current managers in office tasks. This leads to two other closely related problems, a managerial culture, which is not encouraged and unilateral substitutability, i.e. the heads can fill in the gaps in the operational area, but the opposite is not possible. The head of each sector must interface with the administrative area for customers and suppliers, which constitutes an additional burden of tasks for the sector heads who, especially at certain times, e.g. holiday periods, monthly closures of activities in terms of budget, have an overload of tasks to perform that sometimes forces them to stay beyond the 8-hours working time. Finally, from the analysis of the production area and therefore, of the management of the workers, a strong operational-strategic dependence between the teams of workers and the sector manager emerged. There is a lack of intermediate responsibilities among workers who are unable or unwilling to take responsibility for operational and organisational choices even when they would be able to support them thanks to previous experience. Moreover, there is no horizontal mobility between sectors, although it could be activated in some tasks.

CASE STUDY
Social Cooperative - Agridea

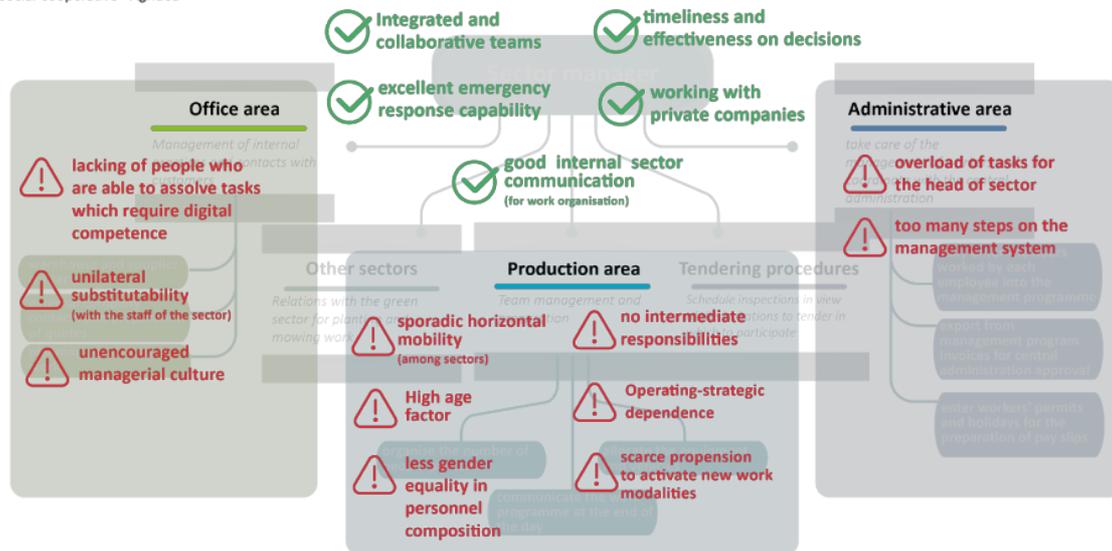


Fig.3 Criticalities and potentialities of a sector

Among the positive aspects that emerged, there is certainly good internal communication between sectors and efficient timing in making decisions, especially in response to work emergencies.

The teams are integrated and collaborative in two sectors (gardeners and cemeteries) while the sector of selected waste collection sometimes suffers from conflicts between workers. Furthermore, among the critical aspects that emerged between the first and second phases of the analysis, there are the difficulties in communicating changes and their acceptance. Communications between the sector managers and the workers are quite efficient but there is resistance for some subjects, especially in monitoring the proposed changes at organisation and management level. Interviews with the president and the workers' members showed that of the three sectors, the selected waste collection is the one that has had the lowest growth and for which there has been no news for many years. At the organisational level, there has been a strong propensity to solve problems in the immediate future, probably thanks to the solid experience of 30 years of work. At the same time, an inability to plan solutions to problems that are repeated cyclically (i.e. at seasonal level or annual) has also emerged. This may be partly due to have mostly works through tenders with variable durations: it is difficult to apply a method for solving problems that there is no certainty of having to deal with those problems again. Based on these assumptions, we decided to deal with the transmission of information as a first step to be able to implement organisational changes in the future. Given the nature of the company and its workers, it is indispensable that all the workers of the cooperative are aware of the processes active in the organisation of work, in this way it is possible to raise awareness towards the assumption of greater responsibility and collaboration.

In this perspective, an active training course was started which involved a first group of 30 people. At the end of the training, we expect to be able to identify among the workers those

who have shown greater predisposition in assuming roles of responsibility and who are evaluated by colleagues as reliable. The final intent will be to implement changes in the cooperative not only as regards the organization chart but also in the management of workflows. Moreover, the organizational changes should come through a co-design process within the workers.

Conclusion

The paper analysed through the methodology of SD the case study of the type B social cooperative, Agridea, in order to have some preliminary data and reflection on how the organizational model could be more effective in this times. The intent of mapping the growing complexity in the economic and social context that cooperative enterprises must face is to design a new organizational model concerning both the internal structure and therefore the roles and responsibilities of employees and external activities. With the new model, the aim is to develop new supply chains and new synergies, able to make the cooperative strong and resilient in the territory and in the context of action. This new type of social enterprise will be able to contribute to the development of new local economies, and the social impact will be greater as the relationships and actions undertaken increase. Above all, not only an innovative organizational model will be valuable outcomes of this research, but also the way in which this will be designed. This study aims to be the first step in the development of a project that will lead the Agridea cooperative to concretely implement the new model of organization. In addition, the paper contributes to the scientific literature by providing a deeper knowledge on the needs that social cooperatives must diversify within the national economic context. Moreover, it wants to contribute to the development of a more sustainable cooperative economy with full respect for the social mission.

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About the Authors:

Caterina Rosini is a PhD student in Management Production and Design at the Politecnico di Torino (Department of Management and Production Engineering). Her doctoral research focuses on applying the Systemic Design in organizations, especially cooperatives, with the intent to boost the development of a sustainable enterprise model which respects the resources of our planet, both humans and materials.

Silvia Barbero, PhD, is an Associate Professor at Politecnico di Torino (Department of Architecture and Design). She is a lecturer of “Product Environmental Requirements” at the Design and Visual Communication degree and of “Open Systems” at the Systemic Design Master degree. She is also responsible for the stage & job in design curriculum. Her research mainly focuses on Systemic Design applied to territorial sustainable development.

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