



COPE Project
GAP ANALYSIS IN ITALY (SERN)



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CONTEXT

It was at the end of the Sixties and throughout the Eighties that the cooperation in Emilia Romagna region had its most significant development, favored by the political and social climate particularly attentive to the cooperative form and by the legislative interventions of those years.

The cooperatives were structured in such a way as to better respond to the needs of the market, and in particular to those of industry and local authorities, supporting their development over the decades. In this perspective of service to the community, cleaning, collective catering, transport and design companies were set up, thus increasing the service sector, practically non-existent a few years earlier. Cultural cooperation also managed to play an important role.

These are years in which the Cooperative Movement assumes a mature configuration: the companies acquire more and more their own personality, and at the same time the consortia, while maintaining the role of structures at the service of the cooperatives, are also beginning to be characterized by their entrepreneurial autonomy.

The Eighties represent a further moment of transformation: unifications, the ability of cooperatives to operate increasingly outside the territorial boundaries, the development of cooperation in new and important sectors (such as services to businesses and people, tourism) they increase the need for a new business culture, a managerial approach to development, great attention to financial aspects as an indispensable support for the development of cooperatives.

In the mid-1980s, a good number of cooperatives were set up, responding to objective needs and a widespread sense of solidarity, aimed above all at socio-health assistance, education and employment for disadvantaged people. Strong impetus in this sector, occurred at the beginning of the nineties, when the Public Administrations began to outsource many social services.

The last two decades, despite the recent crisis in some sectors and the global economic-financial situation of recent years, testify to a constant development of cooperation, which manages to link the challenge of business modernization and globalization with the recovery of the founding principles cooperation such as solidarity and the centrality of the member.

The peculiar aspects of cooperation, starting with the ability to guarantee real employment and social cohesion, taking care of the needs of local communities, always represent a response to the crises of an economic system based mainly on finance. The Cooperation, in fact, guarantees the constant



reinvestment of profits, the maintenance on the territory of the wealth produced, the impossibility of selling the company and subjecting it to purely financial logic.¹

Today in Emilia (part of the region Emilia-Romagna) the cooperatives operate in numerous markets, including in a leadership position in their respective sectors, such as large-scale commercial distribution, construction, plant engineering, agriculture and agro-industry, transport, catering, services to businesses and individuals, financial, housing, tourism.

PRODUCTION PROCESS

The interviews were all addressed to trainers working within LEGACOOP Emilia Ovest, with the three province of Piacenza, Parma and Reggio Emilia.

Founded in 1886, Legacoop, the National League of Cooperatives, is the oldest of the Italian cooperative organizations. Legacoop is an association of cooperative enterprises which works to promote the development of the associated companies and to favor the diffusion of cooperative principles and values.

In order to be close to its companies every day, Legacoop has equipped itself with a branched territorial organization that leads it today to be present in all regions of our country both with regional offices and with territorial offices in all areas (like in the case of Legacoop Emilia Ovest) characterized by a strong cooperative presence.

We decided to interview Legacoop trainers because they immediately showed great interest in the project because they have a lot of experience in promoting the cooperative model, since they offer courses on education for cooperative entrepreneurship in local high schools, in the Universities of Parma and Piacenza and they offer advice to those who are interested in starting new cooperatives (groups or individuals). It is included in the statute of Legacoop that training on the cooperative model is offered free of charge to anyone interested in order to allow the growth of cooperatives in Italy.

The interviews took place individually, online via the Teams platform. Interviews lasting approximately one hour each and were recorded.

QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

INTERVIEWS

¹ https://www.legacoopemiliaovest.it/app/storia-valori/storia-valori.jsp?url?IdC=4106&IdS=4107&tipo_padre=0&tipo_clickato=0&id_prodotto=748323&tipo=0&css=legacoop.css



**1. For how long have you been an instructor promoting entrepreneurship education?
How did you accumulate the knowledge you currently have?**

All interviewed replied that they have been trainers or consultants for more than 2 years. 4 out of 8 trainers said they had been consultants for more than 10 years.

All the interviewees replied that as far as training is concerned, they were internally trained by the colleagues they supported in the first training sessions.

On specific topics such as auditing, labor regulations, there are annual compulsory courses that they must attend. But no one has received any particular training on how to be a trainer and how to promote the cooperative model, they just learned it in the field with colleagues and through the training organized by Legacoop at a regional level periodically.

Only one among the Interviewed completed the Master on Management for the Cooperative Enterprise (MIC), a higher education course for managers and executives of cooperative enterprises organized by the Quadir cooperative higher education school. It is divided into academic lectures, seminars, workshops and laboratories held by teachers from the main Italian universities. The duration is 168 hours. The trainer that completed the mentioned master said it was very useful to better understand what those entering the world of cooperatives need to know.

2. How do you and your organization work in the promotion of the cooperative entrepreneurship with adults? (i.e., working individually or with groups)

The interviewees stated that Legacoop has the aim of creating new cooperatives in its statute. For this reason they invest heavily in training to promote entrepreneurship education and to present the cooperative business model.

The people that have been interviewed work in several ways in the promotion of the cooperative model both in groups and individually. This occurs in the Emilia Romagna region but is also valid for other regions and other territorial offices.

In groups

- trainings in high school (BELLA COPIA project) with students 17-18 years old, with groups of 20-25 students
- trainings in Universities (BELLA COPIA University) with the University of Parma, Piacenza and UNIMORE Modena and Reggio Emilia. The training reaches students who are in 5 departments at University (Engineering, Life Science, Economy, Communication and Education Sciences), about 100 per year
- trainings on cooperative model to civil service volunteers (young adults among 18-27 years)

Individually:

- Small groups or single people can reach the office of Legacoop and ask for information to evaluate the possibility of opening a cooperative. In a first phase, the people are followed by a single consultant, then if the project of setting up the cooperative goes ahead, other experts and colleagues are also involved in consulting.

All consultancy activities include a reference trainer and other trainers/experts that will join the course dealing only with the more technical aspects of training such as the business plan, the legislation on employment contracts.

3. How do you reach your target group?

The target group is reached with structured courses (with a defined number of hours according to the different target groups) that are defined by agreements between LEGACOOOP and the schools or LEGACOOOP and the universities or through the agreements for the civil service volunteers training concluded with the department for youth policies.

In addition, many adults (employed but also unemployed) they go directly to meet consultants / trainers in Legacoop offices to request advice on how to create a cooperative.

4. Which groups or sectors have reached out to you as an instructor? Where is the strongest demand for the cooperative model?

Depending on the roles of the interviewees, it emerged that the groups requesting training were different (students in high school, young people at University, ...).

Apart from structured courses in schools and universities, it emerged that the greatest demand and the greatest in-depth study of entrepreneurship education is done for those who are in the pre-start-up phase, or for those not in pre start-up phase but who already have a company project that directly address the association LEGACOOOP.

5. Did you organise mentoring activities for groups in pre-start-up phase?

The interviewed presented COOP START UP a training course, planned and designed inside Legacoop, aimed at setting up new cooperative enterprises. It is based on a call that is opened in October and closed in January of the following year, in which anyone with a minimally structured idea of a business cooperative can apply for. 20 project ideas are chosen among all those who apply to be part of the training. The groups will follow a group training course, with a program built for them. A part of the training is in group and a part is individual, as topics as the business plan should be done individually. For those interested, after the training, there is a consultancy offered for the establishment of a business. Sometimes there is also an economic contribution for those who have developed the best idea.

Apart from COOP START UP, which has already had two editions, some interviewed declares that they have been involved in consultancy to groups in the pre-start-up phase made on the basis of the request, for groups that arrive directly at the Legacoop office, at any time of the year (also outside the call opening period).

6. How do you plan and implement trainings on cooperative entrepreneurship? Are you following training modules?

For each training course there is a schedule based on who will attend it and the hours available. In school there are specific training modules, different from the one at University. For the training

offered to universities there are specific modules to follow, calibrated on the basis of the hours available and also of the university course. For Economy students, the business plan and financial aspects are certainly more elaborated than for other students. From the interviews it emerges how essential it is that the trainer adapts the modules to the target group, and that the language is also modulated according to the group.

7. Which are the training topics?

The training topics depend on the target groups but for the trainings offered to adults there is a prevalence of corporate, governance, financial aspects.

Main topics:

- cooperative principles and values
- Governance,
- Financial sustainability,
- business plan,
- market analysis
- Knowledge of the cooperative enterprise from a legal point of view
- employment contracts and social security aspects

8. How did you present the financial aspects and the business planning?

The Business plan is presented in all trainings with a different in-depth analysis, depending on the target group. In the trainings offered at University, the students develop a business plan in groups, simulating the creation of a cooperative enterprise from the beginning. The business plan is taught to develop a plan that is as real as possible and can be used as a basis for the development of a cooperative.

This very technical part is usually presented by a trainer with expertise on financial aspects.

9. How do you present the cooperative principles and the cooperative governance model?

For all trainers, cooperative principles and cooperative governance are defined as the essential elements of all training because it is necessary to make clear that the difference between enterprises and cooperative enterprises lies in their governance, in the democratic principles and in the fact that in a cooperative enterprise all members count equally.

On this specific aspect, the training will present:

- Drafting of articles of association in the statute
- presentation of how the boards of directors are structured
- establishment of a work team,
- opening bank account,
- opening VAT number

10. How do you present the topics of sustainability and innovation?

The topics of sustainability and innovation are linked to the 2030 agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals.

The sustainability is presented firstly with a general framework for those who already know it, and then testimonies of cooperatives that are working and developing services that approach these issues, present the topic of sustainability through examples.

One of the interviewed who has been working in the world of entrepreneurship education for the longest time said that the issue of sustainability should be tackled more deeply to keep up with modern times and to prove that the cooperative model can also be applied to sustainable businesses.

11. How did you introduce the topics of entrepreneurial marketing and scaling in business?

The explanation of the different and main aspects of business marketing, are presented through a theoretical lesson. Besides, the trainers reflect and discuss with the group that is attending the training with a view to future development of an enterprise to understand what could be done and what should be considered when thinking about growing a business.

In the trainings are presented the main elements about marketing strategies, communication and social media.

12. Which training methods do you use to improve learning development? (Case study, Games-based training, lecture, Role-Play, simulation,...) which methods do you think are more suitable?

The most popular training methods are:

Lecture, power point presentation, case study, simulations and video testimonials. The most suitable methods, according to the interviewed are the case study, story telling inviting representatives from cooperatives telling the story of the cooperative and their experience in creating a new enterprises.

13. According to your experience, what is missing or what should be more developed in a training on cooperative entrepreneurship?

Among the trainers emerged the fact that some method should be more considered during the trainings, as simulations and gamifications. Simulations allow people to enter the complex reality of the company and games -based training are very useful when you work with young people, it is a way to keep the attention high and also to get involved.

Some of the interviewed noticed a lack of engaging testimonials, not just telling what is being done but trying to involve the audience.

For others interviewed, it is missing the use of interesting, animated videos that are also graphically more interesting.

For half of the interviewees, it is necessary to leverage more on why to choose the cooperative model rather than other business models, reinforcing the added value that the cooperative model presents.

Among other things that have emerged, there is the concept of cooperation between cooperatives that should be further developed. More space should be given to the fact that when you want to start a new cooperative a good idea is to start responding to the need of another cooperative, compensating its needs. Because this networking between cooperatives works very well and ensures success.

There are also those who suggest that trainers to become such (they consider themselves more like consultants) should receive specific training. Some of the trainers mentioned the fact that Legacoop's work is more as consultant than trainer and perhaps there is a lack of teaching methodologies as no one in the association is a professional trainer. For being a trainer, you need to have innovative methodologies and specific training for it.

For another trainer, what is missing is improving the ability to intercept innovative ideas since the trainings, and have more relations with the researcher centers and universities in order to promote more and more the innovation.

An interesting element that emerged from one of the interviewees is that the trainings should work more on an emotional level, involving people from an emotional point of view, when speaking of equality as a fundamental principle of the cooperative enterprise, of members' participation in decisions making processes. This is what is essential to give to the cooperative enterprise the same dignity that all the other enterprises have and to restore a more positive image to the cooperatives. This is also due to the fact that the media often represent cooperatives in a very negative way, speaking little about successful cases and giving much emphasis to failure cases.

14. According to your experience, what makes a training successful? Present a good practice from your experience.

The main elements that make a training successful are:

- Being able to establish an empathic relationship. In every situation, think together, simplifying the language to put yourself at the right level of the person listening. Understanding the person in front of you, be patient when doubts arise.
- Extreme availability of the consultant, not only encouraging but also to foresee the difficulties in the project presented.
- A direct referent for each group but having different professional skills behind them that are activated if necessary
- Key role of the consultant: Those who present the project are in love with the idea of creating its own cooperative and find it hard to see the weaknesses. The trainer must be able to look further ahead in understanding whether the business is sustainable. The key is to accompany in the establishment of a sustainable company that can last. The trainer / consultant must have a lot of experience and must follow the enterprise for a long period.
- a training course is carried out well when what is learned in the classroom is applied in reality. There is a need of courses more based on the reality and less on the theoretical part.
- A training is successful when it is continuous training, in the pre start up phase and in the subsequent phase in which the cooperative is already created, for at least 1 year after the creation of the new enterprise.



GOOD PRACTICE:



SMARTWEAR Cooperative created in 2019 have devised a series of tools including a "glove" that processes biomechanical data and measures the movements of the wearer at work. Through this analysis, solutions are sought to reduce the risk of incurring musculoskeletal injuries.

You tube video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TwKV80Oej1w&t=1s>

The 4 founders of the cooperative initially followed the training offered by Legacoop at the University (BELLA COPIA University). During this phase they had simulated the creation of a business and understood that they wanted to develop their entrepreneurial spirit. For this reason, with an already partially structured idea, they apply for COOP start up, the path offered by the Legacoop association for those who are in the pre-start up phase. They were part of the 20 start-up projects that had access to training called COOP start up, aimed at the end, to the creation of the cooperative.

They successfully completed the second training course, (first BELLA COPIA University and after COOP START UP. In the COOP START UP path it is also envisaged that a small fund can be won by the participant who have a brilliant idea to be used to start the cooperative. The 4 founders won a contribution of 15 thousand euros and soon it was born SMARTWEAR. After few years the cooperative continues to operate and is having a good success.

15. what are the biggest challenges in your work? and how do you try to overcome these challenges?

The interviewed trainers underlined some points that are considered the main challenges:

FEWER CREATION OF COOPERATIVES IN THE LAST YEARS: the problem arises because times have changed and it is difficult to combine the role that the cooperative model has played in history with modernity. The cooperative mode must not ignore innovation and not remain in rigid positions, look at sustainability, new welfare issues, new services, supporting new companies that are unable to restart after the COVID crisis, these can be a way to adapt the model to modern times.

NEGATIVE IMAGE OF THE COOPERATIVES: A challenge is to make the cooperative model not perceived as a minus compared to the non-cooperative enterprise. They are two different things, with different strengths. Most of the rapidly growing businesses whose entrepreneurs get rich quick are never cooperatives and this suggests that the cooperative is worth less than other business models. Let be a series model b.

Moreover, a negative image of the world of cooperatives also derives from the presentation made of it by the media, in the last years in Italy. There was a particular focus on cooperatives, especially social cooperatives that actually had an unclear management of their finances.

COMMUNICATION: the trainer has to put himself more in other shoes. This means that in order to be effective it is important to ensure that the trainer is an effective communicator, that he is chosen for his ability to teach and for his interpersonal skills. Specific training for trainers are important.

LACK OF LONG-TERM FINANCIAL PLANNING OF THE COOPERATIVE ENTREPRISE: There is little awareness of the cooperative enterprise in the future, in planning the future steps after the creation. Little planning for the future is because many companies believe that investing in this sense can be a waste. A solution is in initial training offered to make people understand the importance of planning and financial planning even after the cooperative has started as a good economic and financial awareness can avoid many problems along the years.



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CONCLUSIONS

What emerges most at the end of the 8 interviews with the trainers is that specific training is needed for trainers. Training should not be based so much on content as on how to be a trainer.

Surely the other aspect that most emerged is the need to better understand the value that the cooperative model carries within itself. Value understood as strengths, which can then motivate the creation of new cooperatives.