

FOOD COOPERATIVES

Lessons for Poland in the EU



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FOOD COOPERA- TIVES Lessons for Poland **in the EU**

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1

Cooperatives in theory





Why it is worth talking about food cooperatives

NEW COOPERATIVISM FOR THE NEW TIMES?

In 2020, while accepting his Oscar award, Joaquin Phoenix drew attention to the relationship between mankind and nature, “I feel we’ve become very disconnected from the natural world. Many of us believe that we are the center of the universe. We go into the natural world and we plunder it for its resources”¹. The climate catastrophe is a fact that is noted – at least at the level of declaration – by the majority of the EU citizens. 93% of them believe that climate catastrophe is a “serious problem”².

The food system is heavily dependent on climate and environmental conditions, and it itself has a considerably negative impact on them. It is estimated that the food system is currently responsible for 30% of global greenhouse gas emissions, half of which come from meat production, and it also contributes to 70% of drinking water consumption. For example, with the expansion of industrial animal farms, environmental risks have emerged, such as the increase in hormones and antibiotics contained in drinking water. The

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globalised food system is also having an adverse influence on social development, as it contributes to increased inequality – small farms account for 72% of all farms, yet they only occupy 8% of agricultural land³. Most subsidies and profits from farming go therefore to a small number of powerful producers, most of whom are owned by global corporations.

At the same time, the food system is inefficient, as 30% of the world's food is wasted, while 10% (830 million) of the global population is still undernourished. The war in Ukraine has also significantly exacerbated the global hunger problem, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. In the developed world today, we must deal with a completely different problem: the increasing percentage of obese people who, despite their excess calorie intake, are still lacking the nutrients necessary for their bodies to develop healthily; 30% of the world's population is already obese⁴. Subject to the dictates of capitalist monopolisation (production of so-called junk food by global corporations), the contemporary system of food production and distribution is driving an increase in the number of people suffering from the so-called diseases of civilisation.

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The food cooperative movement grew out of opposition to the global expansion of the mass food system, the monopolisation of production and devaluation of food consumption, which destroy local ecosystems, place a strain on the global environment, and contribute to the disintegration of social bonds. United by a certain vision of a world where it is possible to produce, buy and consume a little less, more honestly, in a friendlier atmosphere, people form small, often informal communities whose aim is to buy goods of better quality,



produced locally and with respect for the rights of the producers of food and other natural products, such as cosmetics, clothing or other forms of handicrafts.

Food cooperatives are just one of many types of cooperatives. People organise themselves around issues which are important to them and problems which they find troubling. More and more energy, housing and cycling cooperatives are created. Ideas for completely new initiatives are also emerging: services, education. Marcelo Vieta, a researcher studying South American cooperativism, considered food cooperatives to be part of a broader movement. He called it „the new cooperativism“ in order to distinguish it from large cooperative organisations which have long since lost the spirit of community welfare⁵.

When we describe cooperatives solely as economic organisations or social spaces for the exchange of material goods, we lose sight of one of the most important goals of cooperatives which is to remodel the contemporary social world. Cooperatives operate in the sphere of economics, they introduce an element of group agency, of democratic consumer decision-making, of realising one's own needs in a way that is sustainable and independent

of global corporations. In a nutshell, co-operatives prove that economics is political⁶.

For the members of cooperatives, the main motivation, more or less explicitly articulated, is the desire to create an alternative food chain that would be some kind of remedy for the shortcomings and risks of the current food system. Some see cooperatives as laboratories for social change – the solutions and practices of cooperatives can be applied universally. The details of how this alternative system is to manifest itself vary depending on the cultural and social context. However, they all have a common denominator which includes localness, rootedness, quality food, reducing the number of intermediaries, trust. Each community understands these concepts slightly differently, but a common set of characteristics remains the same for all. The logic of cooperation is inclusive – membership in a cooperative is not determined by a special characteristic that distinguishes a member, but by a need that he or she shares with others; furthermore, cooperation is intrinsically democratic, based on equal access of all members to the management of the community⁷.

THE INSTITUTIONS OF THE COMMON

In attempting to understand the phenomenon of cooperatives, and to appreciate their importance, it is worth referring to the concept of the commons, which is the central economic and political category that determines the logic of cooperative action. In contemporary usage, this concept refers primarily to two scholarly and political traditions. The first is the theory of Elinor Ostrom – author of *Governing the Commons. The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Actions*⁸, winner of the Nobel Prize in Economics – who showed that certain goods (*the commons*), such as coastal fish populations or clean water, need collective governance by the so-called Institutions for Collective Actions, composed of entities or communities that rely on their reproduction. These institutions reproduce themselves around the commons, and they exist thanks to the commons.

The second tradition is what is known as post-operaism, a set of philosophical, political and economic concepts that have developed around the leading figures of the Autonomia Operaia' movement in Italy, today especially Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, who have been writing together for many years, authors of the book *Commonwealth*⁹,



which is crucial in this context. Hardt and Negri argue that „the common“ is more than just these or other material goods, even if they are biological goods critical for the life of the communities concerned. It is an inalienable structure for the reproduction of material and social life, and thus includes natural goods, such as rivers or metal ores, as well as social relations and ‘immaterial’ or infrastructural capitals, such as language, technical knowledge, the Internet, and even the very structure of the community – the patterns of collective life. They call the institutions that reproduce the common, *the institutions of the common*¹⁰.

The concept of the common in their interpretation, therefore, does not refer only to things, information, knowledge or places defined by their material properties. The common has multiple personalities¹¹. Communities are formed around natural resources (forests, fisheries, etc.), around places and services¹². Attention is also drawn to another type of the common, which is not about the nature of goods, but rather about the way in which societies organise themselves around basic goods that are collectively produced, reproduced and managed, such as, for example, local knowledge of food processing, common grazing grounds, network code¹³.

Post-operaism strongly contrasts the notion of the common with the concept of ownership, in both the metaphysical sense (the common is not specifically owned by one entity or another) and the economic sense (no one is the exclusive owner of the common)¹⁴. The common turned into property (whether private or public) becomes a source of capital accumulation (both financial and otherwise) and serves the vested interests of individual or collective powers (Hardt and Negri call this process the decomposition or corruption of the common)¹⁵.

The common, e.g. knowledge or network code, therefore, reproduces itself only in a reciprocal relationship, e.g. privatised knowledge cannot develop (imagine the privatisation of mathematical or physical theorems). An important dimension of common action is the reinforcement of democratic self-determination and collective participation in the reproduction of the common. In this perspective, the commons are self-regulating social arrangements for the management of tangible and intangible resources deemed necessary for all,

→ **Main goal**
of cooperatives
is to transform
contemporary
social world.



limited in time and place, changing with different societies, circumstances and technological developments¹⁶. Communities are not about maximising individual benefits, but rather about collective decisions, institutions, ownership and the common goal of maximising the well-being of all.

It is the 'common use' that lends tangible or intangible common resources the characteristics of *the common*. Thus, the common is a structure or mode of reproduction of the community, having both a material and a social or relational form. In fact, also as a material resource, it is the result of cooperation and reciprocal relations between the actors involved, not mediated by any external instance (e.g. government, corporation, church, nation). This is, of course, about human actors, but the most recent new-materialist revisions of the theory of the common also emphasise and even consider crucial the participation of non-human actors in the production of the common, especially other living beings, but also machines or inanimate nature¹⁷.

Viewing cooperatives in this perspective allows us to see them as laboratories of change. That is, a social space where mistakes are made, experiments are conducted collectively so as to create a response to malfunctioning systems, in our case, the food system. In the language of the common, this collective action is referred to as *commoning*. Each cooperative emerges in a slightly different space, so they have slightly different methods of operation. This does not change the fact that they all respond to the shortcomings of the food system in all its dimensions.

Shortening the food chains, bringing the consumer and the producer closer together allow the producer's profit to increase, to have their work valued not only in financial terms, which are very important, but also in terms of respect for their work. It provides an opportunity to understand the environment, nature, the cyclical aspect of nature. They enable the development of a relationship based on the understanding of the countryside by city dwellers, and the appreciation of the expectations and needs of the informed consumer. Acting together through democratic procedures offers a profound lesson in democracy, cooperation, working out small and large compromises. Cooperatives are spaces fostering the appreciation of localness by

buying from local farmers, but they also bind, integrate people with similar values, living locally or in the same neighbourhoods. People put relatively big effort into something that is often seen as a mundane issue, such as food, seeing it as much more than that – a cultural platform, a tool for food system change that occurs through the creation of an everyday community and a bottom-up shift in the logic of the food system.

In the face of the climate crisis that is unfolding on a planetary scale, community-led management of production and consumption processes may be the only way to begin the process of reducing pollution and limiting further forms of environmental destruction, and the only way to create a chance for real protection of the ecosystems that are essential to life. The protection of the ecosystem is an eminently political matter, and not merely an economic or technological one, not only because it requires influence on the world's institutions of power, but also because it concerns the transformation of the polis itself, the place where the human species lives, a community based on human relations, which must now be open to entities hitherto regarded by us as external, that is, animals, plants, objects. It must be understood that the common does not only mean the interaction

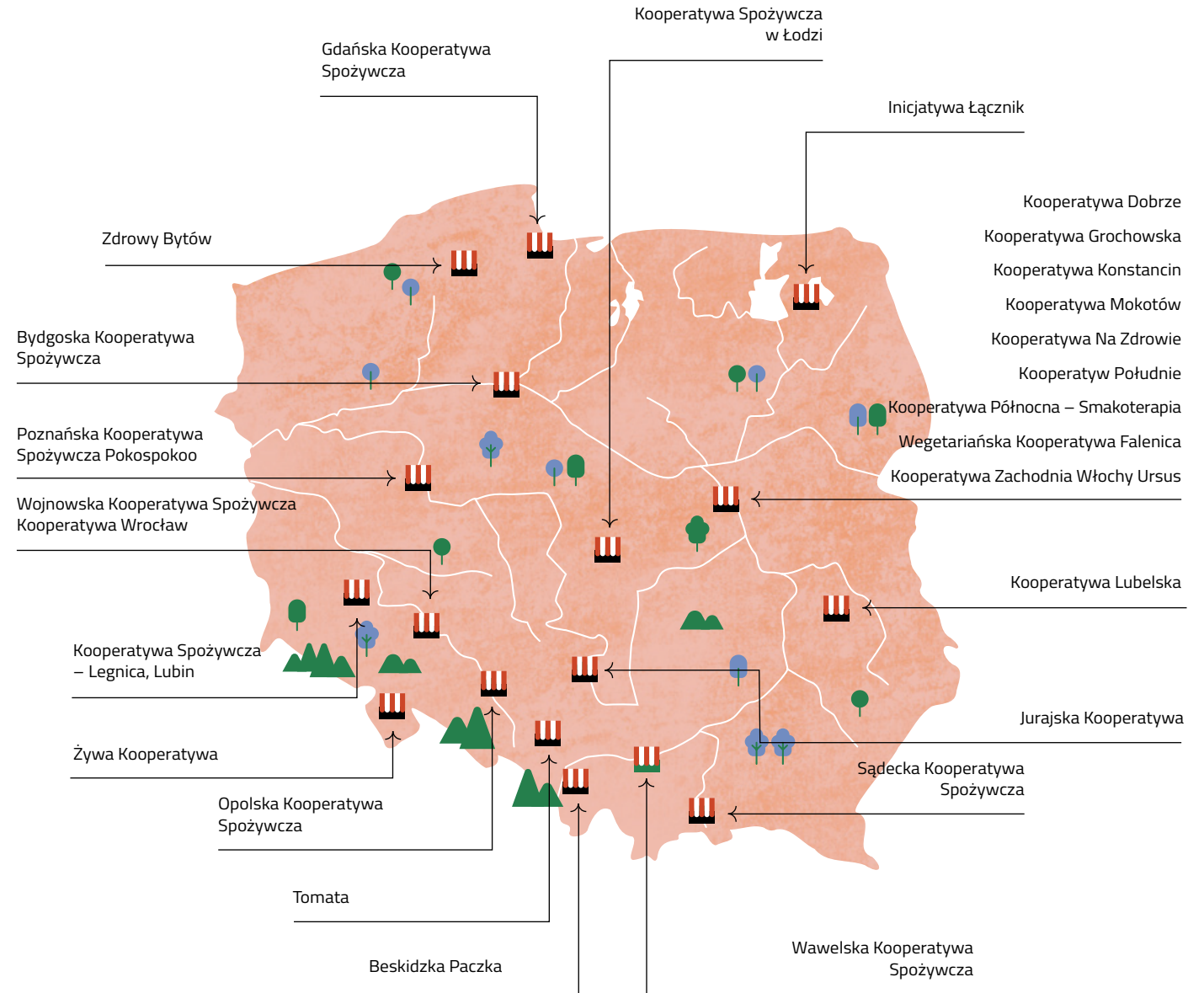


between humans, but also the coupling of humans and non-humans. In this context, the word 'cooperation' can take on a whole new meaning – cooperation as the ground that allows humans to enter into a true relationship with the environment of which they are, after all, a part.

FOOD COOPERATIVES IN POLAND

The first Polish cooperatives began to emerge around 2010, but their roots go back to the second half of the 19th century, when the cooperative movement was born. The ideas of mutual aid and self-education that underpinned that movement are still present today.

Food cooperatives are grassroots initiatives – mostly informal in Poland – aimed at obtaining high quality agricultural produce, food products or personal hygiene products directly from local producers. The criteria for the operation of a given cooperative, including the food sold within a given network, are negotiated democratically by the members of individual organisations. The activities of cooperatives are socially, environmentally and economically important and are therefore in line

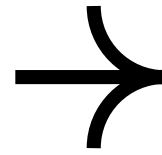


Source: Authors' own compilation based on the data collected by Katarzyna Kowalówka.



with the European Green Deal Strategy. Research has shown¹⁸ that Polish cooperatives are mainly supplied by organic farmers (not always certified) and small food processing businesses that use local products, while customers/consumers, knowing their suppliers, make informed purchasing decisions. Thereby, food cooperatives have long been putting into practice the objectives of the EU's „Farm to Fork“ Strategy¹⁹, which assumes that all actors in the food chain, from the primary producer to the final consumer, must play a role in the creation and functioning of a sustainable food system. Thanks to the informed consumers from these grassroots initiatives, environmentally sound agriculture (e.g. regenerative agriculture) is developing in Poland in a more sustainable way, as the farmers who choose this type of farming practices have greater certainty of being able to sell their produce.

Cooperatives also serve an important educational and integrative function. As they usually operate at the level of neighbourhoods and housing estates, they integrate people around common goals, and over time their activities are extended, for example to the creation of community gardens (e.g. Kooperatywa Grochowska). Members of cooperatives are often families with children; being



Localness

is the key – namely

rootedness,

**environmental issues
and the trust**

active in a cooperative allows children and adults to understand what seasonal and local food is, what real costs are involved in producing high-quality food. Many cooperatives carry out various charitable activities (e.g. helping refugees).



As mostly informal institutions, cooperatives do not receive any institutional, financial or material support (e.g. in the form of access to public spaces), which means that they remain mainly the domain of people with high social, cultural and financial capital, who, due to their affluence can afford to develop such an organisation in pursuit of their own passion or idea. Moreover, Polish cooperatives are not integrated, which means that they do not benefit from each other's experience and mutual support. In some EU countries, existing food cooperatives are institutionally rooted in the social space of towns and villages and have developed paths of cooperation with public institutions, the third sector and the market. Some cooperatives involve people from marginalised backgrounds in their activities, including refugees.

It is difficult to say exactly how many cooperatives are currently operating in Poland, as most of them are informal, grassroots movements. It is estimated that there are about 50 of them all over the country, mainly in large cities, but there are also some smaller associations, with a dozen or a few dozen members. Below we present a map of Polish cooperatives created on the basis of data obtained by members of the Food Cooperatives Network (Skoops) – an informal group formed by

members of several Polish cooperatives, whose aim is to accelerate the development of the cooperative movement in Poland. This data is largely estimates and requires further updating.

In 2022, as previously mentioned, there are about 50 food cooperatives in Poland – they supply a maximum of 5 000 people. The first ones started to emerge around 2010. In 2016, a researcher estimated that there were only 15 of them²⁰. So we are seeing a slow but steady increase in their number. Unfortunately, many of them disappear after a few seasons of operation. The more permanent ones are those developed in large cities, where access to high-quality produce is more difficult than in smaller towns, so the motivation to keep them alive is greater. Since in Poland, with a few exceptions, they rely solely on voluntary work, after a while the enthusiasm and willingness to work regularly wears off and leaders drop out. The groups do not always have the ability to solve the problems that arise sooner or later. In addition, as most cooperatives operate in public spaces (schools, municipalities) informally provided free of charge, a change in the management of these institutions or the emergence of conflicts means that the cooperatives lose their operating space. The inflation has also reduced the number

of people who can afford their products. The functioning of cooperatives is also affected by the limited number of producers who farm in an organic, sustainable way and would be interested in supplying to cooperatives.

As mentioned above, individual cooperatives operate in different ways on a daily basis. In Poland, most of them are informal groups, often using the space offered by cultural institutions, schools and community activity centres. They meet once a week or twice a month and between meetings they place orders with farmers, local producers. Usually someone else is responsible for contacting each supplier. Some cooperatives only order products that are certified for organic farming. Many opt for a certificate of trust, i.e. ordering products from a farmer or food processor they trust. Most often, each member of the cooperative has to work a small, fixed number of hours per month for the community.



Although 'localness' is a very important value for most cooperatives, they differ in the way they define this concept. Some procure only products available within the province where their cooperative is located, while others restrict themselves to Poland. There are also those that take a more liberal approach to the concept of localness – they order, for example, citrus fruit, not available in Poland, but choose to source them from other cooperative institutions in the countries of origin. Their definitions of 'healthy food' or 'value food' also differ. Many cooperatives do not sell meat, some even do not sell animal products. They also adopt different criteria for selecting suppliers and available products. The criteria that cooperatives apply when looking for a supplier provide some insight into the logic behind the operation of cooperatives. The most important thing is, first, for the producer to operate locally, second, to keep crop protection products to a minimum, and, third, to be known personally by someone from the cooperative. It is therefore localness that is the key – namely rootedness, health, environmental issues and the trust of other members of the cooperative community.

The results of a survey carried out in spring 2022 by the Network of Food Cooperatives (Skoops) among members of Polish cooperatives show what motivates members to join cooperatives, and thus, indirectly, what is most important to them²¹. 86% of respondents decided to join a cooperative in order to have access to fresh, high-quality food. Every second person surveyed wanted to join in order to change the food system because of the situation of farmers, while 45% wanted to change the food system because of climate concerns.

Being a part of a cooperative is a positive, interesting experience. You gain a sense of being rooted in the local community – the members are usually people living in close proximity. As a member of a cooperative, you are part of a community which is based on trust, cooperation and reciprocity. One feels that it is worth doing something together, something that makes sense environmentally, socially and economically. The shared energy often gives rise to new ideas for other projects. For instance, members of cooperatives have become heavily involved in helping refugees after the Russian aggression against Ukraine.

However, cooperatives are not perfect entities. Although they try to find their way within the relentless game of the market, they do not always succeed in preserving all the principles that underpin the movement – localness, environment, democracy, quality, affordability. However, although the prices are slightly higher than in the so-called supermarkets, it is cheaper than in today's trendy organic bazaars. Sometimes the orders do not arrive or arrive late. Members sometimes argue about trifles as well as principles, e.g. what local means or whether you can order from a wholesaler. This is not an initiative for everyone – you have to accept that the vegetables do not always look as appetising as those from the supermarket, and that the supplier has arrived late. You need to order individual items well in advance, so you have to plan meals a week ahead, remember to pay and collect the produce at a specific time on a specific day.

The food bought at cooperatives usually comes with a story, is linked to a specific person or a clearly defined place. The shopping list would be Hania, Krzysiek, Jadzia and so on. Behind each of these names is a product, it may be flour, garlic, poultry. Not all of them are certified organic, but instead, their certification is that of the trust and experience

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of the cooperative members. Sometimes there are also suppliers who do not always prove worthy of the trust placed in them, in which case the cooperation is discontinued.

In his book *Sklepy społeczne* (Social Shops), well-known by Polish cooperative activists, Edward Milewski wrote, „Which branch of education remains for cooperatives? – To raise a citizen. By this I mean educating every member of the society into understanding his or her duties towards other citizens and the society as a whole”²². Cooperatives can be seen as a school of informed citizenship based on informed consumption, a place for sharing experiences resulting from joint action, a platform for debating the opportunities and shortcomings of contemporary society, and finally as the beginning of a transformation process. Cooperatives grow out of the desire to create a „community economy”²³ beyond the prevailing liberal paradigm (or to be more precise, the neo-conservative American model), they are an attempt to institutionalise the common, and their ambition is to pave the way for future forms of social and economic emancipation, new organisational solutions that will result in a fair distribution of wealth and sustainable production/consumption in the future world.



Objective and research method of the report

The objective behind this report is twofold: firstly, to explore the patterns of operation followed by cooperatives in selected European countries – both those, such as Czechia and Hungary, with a fairly similar recent history (the communist period) and those with a slightly different socio-economic structure and history – such as Spain and Italy. Secondly, looking at how food associations function in the selected locations is intended to inspire reflection on the situation of Polish food cooperatives today and to develop

ideas about possible development paths for the sector. The aim of the study is therefore to improve the functioning of food cooperatives in Poland and to create conditions for the dissemination of the cooperative model. In order to achieve it, the legal and organisational models found in four other EU countries will be studied and described, providing a reference point for our work in Poland. The information gathered will support cooperativists in designing further organisational solutions for the food cooperative sector as well



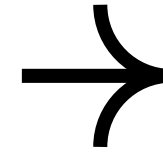
as disseminating the ethos and model of cooperative organisation.

In addition to legal and organisational issues, we are interested in axiological aspects – the values attributed by members of cooperatives to their communities and to the cooperative movement as a whole. We have examined the motivations for engaging in cooperatives, their impact on the near and more distant environment, including the discourse around food systems change, the relationship with the social environment, as well as the impact on the local food policy.

In each country, we carried out interviews online or in person (only in Czechia) with members of cooperatives involved in the activities and/or holding management positions, and we also tried to reach farmers who supply to the cooperatives. In Spain, in addition, a representative of one of the many umbrella organisations was interviewed. A total of 16 in-depth interviews were conducted with people involved in the development of cooperatives, plus two in-depth interviews with researchers studying cooperative movements. Furthermore, the researchers conducted a number of conversations via the Messenger accounts of various organisations in the countries studied, and they

also analysed the statutes, websites, funpages of the studied institutions as well as other secondary data.

Questions ranged from organisational issues, including umbrella activities, the values that guide members, including criteria for engaging with farmers or producers, to future plans (an annex with the unstructured interview questionnaire is included at the end of the report).



The aim is to **improve** the functioning of food cooperatives in Poland

Materials produced by the cooperatives, such as bylaws, statutes, ordering platforms, websites, newsletters were also analysed. We decided to select four countries for the study: Hungary, Czechia, Italy and Spain. We used non-random sampling, which is a subjective selection of individuals for the study, based on expert knowledge. We have chosen this type of sampling because no comprehensive data exists on the number of food cooperatives in Europe and our study constitutes a kind of a pilot study, a means to explore the situation in the EU.



Hungary and Czechia represent Central and Eastern Europe, which differs in many respects from the rest of the EU. Their common denominator is the fact that after the Second World War they underwent a process of collectivisation, whose effects are still visible today in their agrarian structure, which in turn has an impact on the structure of production. The cooperative activity forced upon them during the communist period has resulted in most farmers after 1989 being very reluctant towards such community-based activities.

The low level of public trust that is characteristic for this region is a legacy of communism. Unlike countries in the rest of the EU, this area is marked by low trust in community-based forms of economic activity, as well as in public institutions.

The above features make this an area where the development of cooperativism may be hampered at both formal and informal levels. We have decided to choose Hungary and Czechia in order to see how consumer cooperatives develop in socio-economic conditions similar to those in Poland and how they cope (or fail to cope) with difficulties similar to ours (low social capital or low levels of good governance).

Spain and Italy, on the other hand, have been selected because they are examples of countries where the food cooperative movement has been active for many years. The democratic system which has been in place there since the Second World War has made this possible. It paved the way for the development of legal and institutional solutions that laid the foundations for a strong, large cooperative movement. Spain has a rich and relatively long history of cooperatives. The country is home not only to consumer cooperatives, but to many other types – banking, housing, energy cooperatives. There is also a wide range of institutions supporting their operation.

Italy, too, is an interesting country, and one worth analysing given the huge number of GAS (*Gruppi d'acquisto solidale*), Solidarity Purchasing Groups, that exist there. Their dynamic growth began at the beginning of the 21st century and continues uninterrupted to this day. It is estimated that between 2018 and 2020 alone, this type of short food chain attracted as many as 800,000 people. The experience of numerous umbrella organisations facilitating the activities of the groups can provide excellent inspiration for a Polish umbrella organisation.

The origins of food cooperatives in poland. On the benefits of umbrella organisations

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the fledgling food cooperative movement in Poland was in a situation very similar to that seen today in the Polish food cooperative sector. Initially, the passionate ideas and enthusiasm for the new form of organisation began to attract a certain number of city dwellers, but it was difficult to exceed the level of commitment that would enable the movement to expand. Although in a few places there were thriving grocers' associations, such as the Warsaw „Mercury”, composed mainly of members of

the middle class (merchants, craftsmen, bourgeoisie)²⁴, a number of factors stood in the way of their further development: the division of the partitioned country, which meant that cooperatives could only develop within the legal and economic regimes of the individual parts of the country, the completely different economic conditions in each of the partitions and, as a result, the completely different needs. For example, in Greater Poland – the richest part of Poland – which was governed by the Prussian Empire, food cooperatives hardly developed



at all, as the organisers of the economic life of the Poles believed that they could form competition for Polish entrepreneurs-shopkeepers. Although the greatest demand for this type of initiatives, given the need to supply cheap and good-quality food to the masses of industrial workers in cities such as Łódź or Żyrardów, as well as poor agricultural workers in the countryside, emerged in the Congress Poland – the part of the former Polish state under the Russian partition – even there the development of food cooperatives was prevented by draconian legislation prohibiting the activity of any association on the territory of the „Vistula Land” without the consent of the relevant authorities in St. Petersburg²⁵.

In 1904, the cooperative movement was in decline and, according to official figures, comprised around 50 cooperatives. However, one of the pioneers of the movement, Stanisław Wojciechowski, in a study on the history of cooperatives in Poland, reports 12 active cooperatives with 6171 members, which seems a small number even by today's standards²⁶. Cooperatives appeared to be nothing more than a noble idea, an intellectuals' fairy tale and a bourgeois pastime, until the advent of the events that went down in history as the Workers' Revolution of 1905. The revolution, in which

workers, tired of the social conditions prevailing in the country's main industrial centres on the one hand, and roused by slogans of independence on the other, stood up against the Tsar and the bourgeoisie, pushed for the liberalisation of the law on associations, ignited grassroots social energy, and started a wave of emergence of new cooperatives. Unfortunately, however, in spite of the undeniable achievements of the 1905-1907 uprising, in the Congress Poland the cooperative movement remained relatively weak and niche, lacking either significant developmental capital or the experience and knowledge to operate efficiently.

How did the consumer cooperative movement, the least promising in terms of potential development, in less than a decade develop into a thriving and growing sector of the social economy, functioning as an enclave of just economics in the conditions of almost unregulated peripheral capitalism and an imperialist police state? The answer is to be found in the activities of people such as a philosopher, sociologist and socialist activist Edward Abramowski, a socialist activist and later the president of Poland during the Second Republic (1922-1926) Stanisław Wojciechowski or Romuald Mielczarski, also a socialist activist and an experienced accountant and administrator (perhaps today we would use the

word „manager”). Their pioneering role was not to establish the first food cooperatives (these had already existed earlier, created by members of various, most often worker-craftsmen communities), but to build the organisational structure of a movement which, without federalisation and the building of multi-level bodies bringing together individual initiatives scattered around the Kingdom, would have died out, overwhelmed by the inexorable laws of the market, lacking the critical mass (of both financial and social capital) which would have enabled it to compete with profit- (and often exploitation-) oriented private enterprises.

When, after the workers' revolution of 1905 in the Congress Poland, the Russian administration agreed to a number of concessions regarding the institutionalisation of such organisations, the revolution became a testing ground for various political forces²⁷, while also providing space for the transfer to Poland of Western association and cooperative ideas²⁸. Abramowski, who until then had already remained somewhat distant from the core of the Polish workers' movement, on the wave of the events of 1905-1907, which had made a great impression on him, embarked again on intense organisational activity, co-founding the peasants' left-wing organisation Polski Związek Ludowy



[Polish People's Association]²⁹, and, after its rapid dismantling by the police, committed his energies to the promotion of cooperativism, which he identified with the idea of "stateless socialism".

To many activists and ideologists associated with the Polish Socialist Party [PPS], the 1905 Revolution appeared not only as a workers' uprising, but also as an opportunity for Poles to regain an independent state. Abramowski, too, linked his plan for social modernisation through cooperatives to the national revival. A network of cooperatives, ethical societies and associations was to envelop the future Polish state. The thinker envisioned a reborn Poland precisely along the lines of a 'cooperative republic'. „This spirit of democracy, shaping itself in small individual cooperatives, must, by the necessity of things, proceed to their universal merger into a single organisation [...]”³⁰. Abramowski adopted this notion from the French cooperativists of Nîmes³¹, adapting it to Polish conditions – the 'cooperative republic' ('*rzeczpospolita* – a common thing' in Polish is the equivalent of the Latin *res publica*) was to constitute an ersatz of the Polish state in the conditions of its absence, a social ethos enabling social modernisation without the participation of the state.

→ „Społem” increased the number
of its member cooperatives from

157

in 1910 to

274

in 1913

Revolution, as Abramowski saw it, was an 'every-day experience', the basis for building social institutions that would not only transform the society but also reshape the people themselves through mutual aid and self-governance – it was to become a 'moral revolution' through which the people, by changing their awareness, would transform the socio-economic conditions around them. However, Abramowski, while advocating the moral renewal of the people, was well aware that sudden and immediate revolutionary outbursts were actually counterproductive in building a conscious and organised class³².

Noting the very slow development of the cooperative movement in the Congress Poland, he realised that a meta-organisation would be an indispensable element to speed up the process. In 1905, together with other former members of the PPS and other promoters of science, such as the aforementioned Wojciechowski and Mielczarski, as well as a psychiatrist, Rafał Radziwiłłowicz, and a gynaecologist, Antoni Natanson³³, he founded the Cooperative Society – a unique association whose mission was to accelerate the expansion of the movement in the Kingdom through the accumulation of knowledge. Soon afterwards, the Society launched its own magazine, „Społem!”



[Jointly!] (the name was invented by a member of the Society – Stefan Żeromski), which proved to be an invaluable vehicle for the dissemination of cooperative ideas – initially the *spiritus movens* and chief editor of the magazine was Stanisław Wojciechowski, whose articles promoting cooperativism and organisational activities were instrumental in expanding the movement. The Information Office was also launched as a training centre for the growing number of cooperatives, along with their field branches. The Office assisted the members of the emerging entities in formal, accounting and organisational matters. Thereby a meta-organisation structure of food cooperatives was slowly being formed.

Acting as a member of the Society, Stanisław Wojciechowski, then a friend of Abramowski's from the PPS, decided to put Abramowski's cooperative ideas into practice. As he himself recalled, „Abramowski was very inept in everyday life and unpredictable in his organisational ideas”³⁴, and thus the idea of a cooperative republic had to be adapted to the limited size of the movement in Poland. In 1908, on his initiative, the Congress of Food Associations was held, at which the Information Office was set up, which – led by Wojciechowski and Mielczarski – was to seek to legalise the

charter of the Warsaw Union of Food Associations (as it was originally called). The charter was finally approved by the tsarist authorities in 1911, and this enabled a number of further improvements of the movement, including the creation of a common wholesale market for the associated cooperatives. With the wholesale market, they were able to create a kind of ‘protected market’, and consequently lower the prices in cooperative shops. The meta-structure of the future Union of Food Cooperatives „Społem” was created. It then increased the number of its member cooperatives from 157 in 1910 to 274 in 1913 (with over 40,000 members), later becoming one of the largest food cooperatives in this part of Europe³⁵.

A number of Społem organisers saw the Union as a kind of experiment combining scientific theory with the practice of economic democracy. Edmund Zalewski, referring to Abramowski and Charles Gide, wrote in the *Rzeczpospolita Spółdzielcza* journal that cooperativism was „an experimental sociology, an experimental laboratory of social human life and its economic laws”³⁶. The cooperativists also saw their Union as an institution of the common, based on an ideology independent of both socialism and the conservative right, albeit open to cooperation with any side of the political

scene, as long as it would join in fostering the well-being of the popular masses involved in cooperatives. At the 1908 Congress, Wojciechowski said, “We cooperativists are, in fact, creating a new party in this country – industrial democracy – co-operation shall give us all that we expect of it, but on condition that we do not treat it as a tool for the purposes of any party, creed or class”³⁷.

Grocers' cooperatives were established between the wars in the smallest towns, and, what is important, with time they moved from the urban environment to the countryside. Already in 1930, there were 500 rural entities out of 800 cooperatives affiliated to „Społem”, and in 1938 this disproportion increased even more to the disadvantage of urban cooperatives: out of 1,700 food cooperatives, as many as 1,350 belonged to the rural population³⁸. Food cooperatives constituted a bridge between the city and the countryside – linking the proletariat and the farmers, providing the necessities of life for the lower middle class, the workers and the farmers alike, while at the same time having a positive impact on consumption, providing an outlet for part of the agricultural produce of the agricultural or dairy cooperatives.



During the interwar period, the Union of Food Associations, commonly referred to as 'Społem', was linked to a whole network of institutions whose aim was to create innovative, collective knowledge to improve the cooperative model. These included the aforementioned Cooperative Society, the Departments of Education and Propaganda, the Cooperative School in Nałęczów and, above all, the Cooperative Scientific Institute, the first such body in the world³⁹. The aim of the Institute was not only to organise education and conduct socio-economic analyses for the cooperative movement in Poland, but also to be actively involved in shaping the economic policy of the country (its specialists co-authored, for example, the 1920 Law on Cooperatives). The Union's power grew with each passing year (even the period of the Great Depression, which shook the labour market, did not hinder this), while its influence on not only economic life (between the wars, it was the second largest employer in the country after the state), but also on the socio-cultural life of the country, was enormous. Among cooperativists were many prominent politicians (W. Grabski, S. Wojciechowski, Z. Daszyńska-Golińska), writers (M. Dąbrowska or the aforementioned S. Żeromski) or academics – the greatest inter-war sociologists, including S. Czarnowski, L. Krzywicki, S. Ossowski,

as well as architects or artists (Helena and Szymon Syrkus, Barbara and Stanisław Brukalski, the Praesens group), cooperated with the cooperative movement.

Food cooperatives constituted a significant economic force in the interwar period and they also enjoyed certain political autonomy, deftly manoeuvring between support for the government, which in the 1930s increasingly strived to subordinate the entire cooperative sector to the state, and subordination and inclusion in the top-down economic planning policy. In 1936, Marian Rapacki, then chairman of 'Społem', formulated the 'Economic Program for Consumer Cooperativism'. The program, on the one hand, emphasised the key role of cooperatives in the development of the national economy, but, on the other hand, it continuously upheld the independence of cooperatives from state institutions. The ever greater leaning towards the state was a sign of the times, but it was only thanks to the fact that food cooperatives acted together, associated within the 'Społem' organisation, that the state did not manage to realise its plan for a complete takeover of the cooperative system in the 1930s. It was only after the Second World War, in a completely different political situation, that the state eventually succeeded...



‘Kooperatywa’ or ‘spółdzielnia’. Terminological issues

It seems puzzling that the Polish language uses two, slightly different terms to describe a consumer association – ‘kooperatywa’ or ‘spółdzielnia’. What are the origins of the two terms? Do they have the same meaning or, perhaps, depending on the context, they mean something different? After all, as social phenomena, they are collectively created in the context of social relations and the development of language, where new forms grow out of changing social conditions. Terms are never innocent – although they sound the same, in

different contexts they can mean something completely different⁴⁰. By taking a closer look at these two (or maybe just one?) terms, we can learn more about the complicated history of this form of organisation in Poland.

The terminological split such as the one between ‘kooperatywa’ and ‘spółdzielnia’ does not exist in Western European languages. The word ‘cooperative’ in English exhausts the meaning of both terms. In Polish they seem synonymous. Initially,



the term 'spółdzielnia' or as it was often written, 'współdzielnia' [co-sharing] emerged as the Polish equivalent of the word 'cooperative'. This was purely an attempt to render in a Slavonic language what in Western languages is derived from the Latin *cooperari* – to work together, to act for mutual benefit. In Poland, the words 'stowarzyszenie' [association] or 'spółka' [company] were also used at various times, although the latter – in the course of successive phases of development of the capital market – later came to be associated with a different form of ownership, based on unequal shares and a disproportionate decision-making structure.

Originally, i.e. at the turn of the 20th century and roughly until 1939, these words denoted a single organisational entity. Quite soon, between 1910 and 1920, some divergence in the food movement in Poland became apparent, one that would determine the further fate of the terms in question. It was a conflict between the 'cooperativists' – disapprovingly referred to by their enemies as 'neutralists', in order to emphasise the apolitical nature of the movement. That was to imply acting solely for their own interests in alliance with those who happened to be at the top. The other side of the conflict were the 'classists', proponents of close links between cooperatives and the

workers' movement, and, in practice, advocating the subordination of cooperative organisations to socialist or communist parties. Neutralists were referred to as cooperative activists who followed in the footsteps of Edward Abramowski's ideology of stateless socialism and were linked to the Cooperative Society and the Union of Food Associations 'Społem'. They themselves – implementing one of the so-called Rochdale Principles, the cooperative code as formulated by the pioneers of food cooperatives in Rochdale, England – regarded themselves as non-political only in the sense of not being subject to a particular political party, nor associated with any ideology external to the idea of cooperativism, and not, as some tried to imply, not having any specific political goals. The cooperative movement, as written above, expressed such goals explicitly, considering itself, however, to be guided by its own cooperative ideology, which drew inspiration from socialism, agrarianism or social Christian thought, etc., but was not limited to any of the above. The cooperativists addressed the problem of social transformation, but understood it differently from, for example, the communists, who called for a worldwide revolution. Most cooperativists originated from the Polish left associated with the Polish Socialist Party. They considered their economic activity to be essentially political

activity aimed at a peaceful change of the capitalist order, while cooperatives themselves constituted „institutions of the common" which should be the foundation of the future organisation of society in both economic and political terms (perhaps one day replacing the state in many areas).

Unlike the cooperativists, the class cooperative activists, the 'classists', directly affiliated with the radical left – communists or radical socialists (an important figure in this movement was, for example, Bolesław Bierut) – recognised that cooperatives had a subordinate role to the workers' party, designed to lead to political revolution proper and to overthrow capitalism by force. Thus, the cooperative activity as such did not have a political character; it acquired it only through its association with political groupings which it was supposed to serve. On its own, therefore, it did not lead to regime change, but was simply a form of 'socialism of capital' and therefore another form of collective private property, nothing more. Therefore, if it were not subjected to the dictate of the workers' movement, it would not fulfil its role, becoming only an enclave of justice in a sea of exploitation.

1

Cooperatives in theory

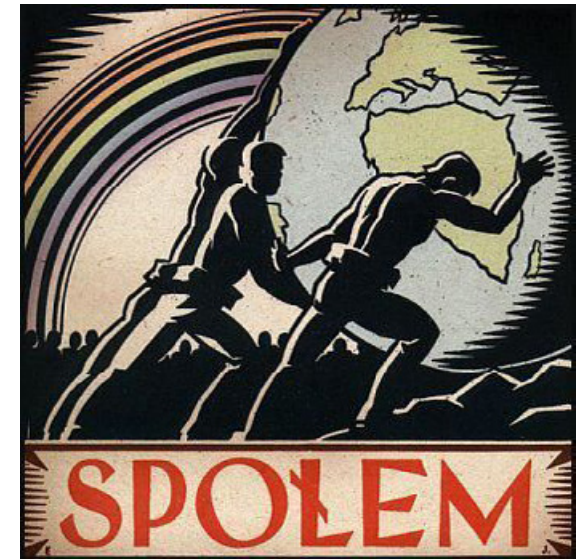


'Kooperatywa' or 'spółdzielnia': Terminological issues

The dispute referred to above did not initially allow the unification of the entire food cooperative movement in the Congress Poland and the Second Polish Republic – until 1925 there were two unions (the Union of Workers' Food Cooperatives and the 'Społem' Union), and even after the unification of the two, political animosities shifted to the inside of the new structure, bursting it, as it were, from within. As can be guessed, in the changed political context after the Second World War it was the classists who gained the decisive say on the political shape of cooperatives in the People's Republic of Poland – cooperatives were subordinated to the party and the state. The communist party incorporated cooperatives to some extent into the state structure, using them to organise consumption and supply chains, but destroying the grassroots spirit and organisational autonomy of 'Społem'. The term 'kooperatywa', associated with Abramowski and the 'neutralists', was relegated to the dustbin. Only 'spółdzielnia' remained and became the term to denote the large cooperative enterprises in the sector. That is why today we associate the word 'spółdzielnia' with relics of the communist era, large molochs that function somewhere between the market economy, the state and cooperation (probably to the least extent). Under the 'real socialism' regime, however, cooperatives [spółdzielnie]

(including „Społem” food cooperatives) became in fact a sector of the economy centrally controlled by the party and the state, which through their activities controlled and organised the society.

The word 'kooperatywa' survived only in writings from before the war and.... returned only when: a) inspired by Western movements developing on the wave of anti-capitalist opposition from the 1970s onwards, activists (mainly associated with the anarchist movement, alter-globalism, environmentalism, post-growth, etc.) began to call their organisations this way in the last decade of the 20th century, referring to the English 'cooperative' rather than the Polish 'spółdzielnia'; b) researchers of the history of cooperativist ideology, e.g. Aleksandra Bilewicz, Bartłomiej Błesznowski, Adam Duszyk, Filip Leszczyński, Remigiusz Okraska, Arkadiusz Peisert, and others, began to restore the connection between contemporary activist practices and the pre-war ideas and unearthed the word from the forgotten annals of history. Thus, there is virtually no semantic difference between 'spółdzielnia' and 'kooperatywa'. However, it has become customary to relate the former to communist 'organisational complexes', which in their post-privatisation form from the period of capitalist transformation in the Third Polish Republic



still exist today, e.g. part of the 'Społem' or housing cooperatives such as the Warsaw Housing Cooperative (originating from the pre-war practices of radical socialists and communists), which operate with a fossilised structure and close ties to the state. The latter, on the other hand, have come to be seen as entities of a young movement born relatively recently – as an alternative both to the former and to the forms of capitalist organisation against which it arose. Thus, although historically the two terms refer to the same root, today they



have come to be used to designate slightly different forms of organisation, embedded in the history of the same idea of cooperation.

In this report, we have chosen to use the word 'kooperatywa' [cooperative] to designate the organisations we studied. We did so for two reasons. Firstly, the term is historically grounded and relates to the 'first spirit' of cooperative activity in Poland, and secondly, it is often – although not always – used by members of the associations and communities whose research forms the basis of this study. It should be noted, however, that in virtually every country studied, these organisations function somewhat differently and use a different term. In Hungary, it is „consumer purchasing groups or purchasing communities” (bevásárló közösségek), in Czechia they are simply referred to as „associations”; in Italy, the term Polish food cooperative [kooperatywa spożywcza] corresponds to „solidarity purchasing group” (GAS – Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale), in Spain, on the other hand, depending on the nature of the cooperative in question, two concepts appear – consumer cooperative' (cooperativo de consumo) and consumer group' (grupo de consumo). As in Poland, the socio-historical context for the adoption of the term was slightly different in each of the countries mentioned. This

is especially true in Western European countries, which have not experienced the period of communist nationalisation of the old cooperatives, while many of them have undergone a process of commercialisation, which has also disrupted the original grassroots cooperative ethos. The 'new cooperatives that emerged in Western countries, wishing to distinguish themselves from the 'cooperatives' of the old type, often chose other terms to emphasise the lack of direct links to the institutionalised (nationalised or commercialised) cooperative movement. However, we felt that the term 'kooperatywa' in the Polish context has already detached itself from its original association with the traditional cooperative movement, and therefore is well suited to describe new, diverse phenomena based on grassroots activity, democratic structure and ecological-post-growth character. Interestingly, however, the largest of the Polish food cooperatives – the Warsaw-based Kooperatywa Spożywcza „Dobrze” – is currently undergoing a transformation process, adopting the legal form of a „cooperative” [spółdzielnia]. It is to be hoped, however, that the adoption of this designation will not distort the cooperative spirit and the community energy that fills the organisation.

FOOTNOTES

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2

Cooperatives in practice





Case studies

Czechia

In Czechia we were able to find only few initiatives that interested us, i.e. social forms of selling quality food. On the other hand, there are many more CSAs¹, than in Poland, it is estimated that in 2020 there were up to 70². The organisations we have reached were established relatively long ago – around 2010 – as informal institutions, to be later transformed into associations. The choice of this form of activity is driven by formal regulations, as it is the most convenient formula for this type of activity under the Czech law.

ORGANISATION

The Prague-based³ organisation has been active since 2013, and in 2017 the association was registered. They run a small shop which is located in a nice old tenement, made available by the city entirely for social activities; there are, for instance, ceramics workshops located there. The cooperative leases space from a bar operating in this tenement. They have a contract until the end of 2023. The cooperative runs a small shop. The rent they pay there is reasonable, so far they have not applied to public institutions for funding to support their activities.

2

Cooperatives in practice



Case studies



Formally, they do not sell the food, but only distribute it, thus avoiding legal problems, so only members of the association can use the shop. To become a member, one has to pay an entry fee, while if someone wants to buy products, they have to pay a certain amount every month. The fees are collected because the association does not want any external investor, they wish to have a democratic decision-making structure. They also have a solidarity fund, paid for by the members, intended for people who cannot afford to pay the fees.

Members are not required to work for the association, but it is welcome and helpful. 20% work regularly, the rest – occasionally. Some people do not use the shop, do not work, but they do pay because they wish thus to support the idea behind the shop. The people who operate the shop receive a salary.

Within the association, there are three types of membership to choose from. One can register as a legal entity (as a supplier or customer) and shop for yourself, but also supply products.

The second form is to register as an individual and shop only for yourself.



If there are more people in the household, there is a third option to register as a family.

The association planned to set up a second shop in another district of Prague, but unfortunately was unable to obtain premises from the city on preferential terms. For a while, while waiting for the second location, the number of members increased a little. However, the absence of that second shop discouraged many people. New members find their way to the association through social media and so-called whisper marketing. The association organises various events to integrate the members and to attract new ones. At the moment, there are 50 members and the number is constantly growing.

The second part of the survey was carried out in Tisnov,⁴ in probably the only shop in Czechia run by the association that is open both to members and non-members – <https://tisnovskaspizirna.cz/>. The first activities began 10 years ago. First as a CSA, then an informal group, and in 2017 the association⁵. The association was formed when the number of people who wanted to purchase products increased while the responsibility and organisation had rested with only two people. There were also tax problems and the single person who

had provided their garage free of charge had been held liable. That person feared the consequences, was worried that someone would think they were trading food illegally.

When the number of people interested increased, they had to look for another solution. Once the association was registered, they hired an accountant (one of the members, so she charges low rates) to ensure financial transparency.

Since 2020, the association has been running the shop in the premises rented on commercial terms. At the same time, two other shops selling local food opened in their area but they are no longer operating. This shows that it is difficult to run such a business. The problem, as in Poland, lies in the very restrictive sanitary rules, which are binding, to the same extent, for small shops such as theirs and for supermarkets. Some of the regulations are not consistent and there is no clear guidance on how this type of association may cooperate with farmers. They would like to support more local producers, but they have to limit themselves only to those who have a registered business. They also work with farmers, small food processors who do not officially run a business but only sell to the old members of the association. This is a method

to support small farmers. For the time being, the shop operates thanks to grants and subsidies from the ministry.

The association gets support from the Ministry of Development. The leaders worry about what will happen when the external funding runs out, because for now the shop is not financially self-sufficient. Members can be more involved in the shop, in which case they pay a higher contribution, which can be withdrawn when the cooperation ends, and they get a 5% discount, but this ensures liquidity. There is also another group of members who work 5 hours a month in the shop and get a 15-20% discount on purchases. This allows them to buy products at the producers' prices and these members can make most decisions together with the board. In practice, board meetings are held infrequently, about twice a year. Day-to-day decisions are made by the shop group, which meets every 2 weeks. When the activity evolved into a shop, people other than the founders of the association – more affluent – appeared, too. Some of them come socially (there is a table in the shop where you can sit, there is also a tiny space for children to play).

2

Cooperatives in practice



Case studies



PRODUCTS

The suppliers in Prague are farmers holding small family farms, but all must be certified organic. One of the funders is a representative of a large biodynamic farm. Some of the suppliers are members of the association, some are not. Farmers in the Prague cooperative must be organic, certified producers, preferably their farms should be located near Prague, but there are also suppliers from further parts of Czechia. They sell meat, but not fish, as there is no organic fish farm in Czechia. The cooperative is considering some form of support for small farmers to get certified. As they declare, their decision to opt for organic products is a certain choice of „a way of life, a celebration of life that cannot be combined with indifference and destruction”⁶.

They do not buy from suppliers outside Czechia, unless they are wholesalers. Once in a while they verify the farmers’ certificates. They look for suppliers themselves, depending on the needs. It is important to them that their organisation operates as zero waste (e.g. use of returnable bottles).

The Tisnov cooperative has drawn its criteria for selecting producers from the Polish „Dobrze”



cooperative. As there are not enough local producers with organic certification, they choose suppliers based on the following criteria:

- delivery without packaging
- local products
- organic farming (not only certified), they try to reach every producer and verify them personally
- diversified offer
- production process
- transport

Products come not only from Czechia but e.g. cider comes from Poland, meat from Germany.

MOTIVATION

A farmer from an area near Prague decided to sell to the cooperative because it is important to him from an ideological point of view – concern for animal welfare, no middlemen, respect for his work. Another farmer, from the Tisnov area likes the direct relationship with buyers, he believes that the environmental aspect is important, and there is space for this in the cooperative. Most farmers do not appreciate this, whereas there are people in the Association for whom this is an important

topic. They did not want to sell their produce to conventional shops because they had had bad experience cooperating with shops before, they were afraid of such cooperation because it had often been disadvantageous for small farmers. Many farmers also see the need to change the system and that is why they want to cooperate with the Association. They also like the contact with the organisation, it is better than contacts with the big chains. They are not all members of the Association, but they are invited to events. For the leaders of both cooperatives, the most important thing is to provide quality products to as many people as possible and to support small farmers.

INSTITUTIONAL ENVIRONMENT

The support from the local government institutions, in the Prague case, consists in the municipality making an entire beautiful townhouse available for social activities and the Association sublets the premises from the bar. The search for a second location has been going on for a long time because cooperation with the city is difficult. In Tisnov the space is commercially rented, the municipality has unfortunately not made its spaces available, although the Association has tried to rent one. It is the amount of rent

that will be the biggest challenge to keep the shop running when the grant expires. Representatives of the city council claim that no such space is available. The municipal authorities view the Association as a commercial enterprise and see no need to support it, although they declare that they endorse pro-environmental activities. There is no regular cooperation with other cooperatives, but informal cooperation does take place, including with the Polish cooperative „Dobrze“.

The Tisnov association takes care of the garden and orchard around the monastery. This orchard is now used by the Ukrainians who are living in the monastery. They are currently running a community kitchen there, where they cook together with Ukrainian refugees once a week, trying to use the produce from the garden. They are just learning how to work together. Each model of operation has its drawbacks, for example, in order for the shop to sustain itself, they have to make some compromises and sell more mass products. People involved in cooperatives and other local projects suffer from fatigue, they need financial but also mental support, so a common European platform would be a good solution. The leaders from Tisnov have been looking for funding for training and networking activities, but so far have not received it.



Hungary

HISTORY

In the Hungarian context, it would be better to call these schemes ‘purchasing clubs’ or ‘consumer purchasing groups’, as they rarely use the legal form of a cooperative. Most operate as associations or foundations, a few operate informally. According to the respondents, cooperatives are not suitable for short food chains, as they require significant investment. They are mainly attractive for retailers and intermediaries, as they are established with their own profit in mind, rather than for producers, farmers.

A Hungarian researcher Zsolia Benedek identified 25 purchasing groups and managed to collect detailed data on 16 of them. According to her estimates, almost 400 farmers, more than 800 consumers, 180 volunteers had been involved in these groups. They vary in the number of members, ranging from 25 to 200. They rely mainly on voluntary work, very few of them have employed staff members⁷.

ORGANISATION

We focused our analysis on two groups, from a large city and a smaller one. One of them operates informally, the other – as an association⁸. The latter, an organisation from Nyíregyháza has been active for nine years, but was established as a result of activities already undertaken since 2008. It has grown out of conversations initiated by American activists associated with the culture creatives movement⁹. Of the 70 people involved in those conversations, 25 remained as an initiative group – it did not include farmers. A local Waldorf

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school offered them a space, and that was where the goods were collected. A teacher from the school volunteered to create the first software, and the pick-up point was also located there. Farmers were sought out at the markets and encouraged to join. It was possible to build a strong organisation because there were several people involved in the community-based learning group. It is a community-based teaching and learning strategy, connecting learners with each other as well as with experts in order to enhance engagement and inspire skill-building. It uses blended forms of learning¹⁰. The association, as declared by the leader, operates on the basis of a business model, which is called „The Business Model Canvas” created by Alexander Osterwalde¹¹

They are keen to make their activities economically sustainable so as not to be dependent on external financing. This is possible because they have volunteers. They also have an agreement (informal) with farmers who donate 10% of their profit to the association, thanks to which a few people get a small salary for their work. In total they make a profit of about 20-30%. And after 5 years they think this is enough. They received small grants (from consumers) for investments, e.g. for refrigerators, and they are currently providing support to



Ukrainian refugees thanks to these grants. They do not get any subsidies from public or local government institutions. In addition to locally produced products, they offer goods from further afield and not necessarily organic, although obviously local has priority. The reason for this is that they want to 'retain' the consumers and make them want to shop there, so they provide them with a fairly wide range of products. They sell not only food, but also cleaning products, cosmetics and books on a wide range of health topics. They began with 20 producers and now have more than 50. At the beginning they had 25 consumer members, now there are 150. Some are leaving, more are joining, but the founding group has lasted continuously since the beginning.

They have created the Participatory Guarantee System (described in more detail in the section 'Product selection criteria') because they want to maintain partnership relationship with suppliers, giving them clear guidelines as to which product features are most important to the members. Products are rated on a scale of 1 to 5, where 5 represents the best and 1 the worst. The most important function of this system is to educate, to raise awareness among the community, consumers and producers.

The Budapest purchasing group, on the other hand, is an informal group. It began operating in 2020. It brings together people who want to get good quality food. It operates on a purely voluntary basis. Forty families make up this group, which makes it a relatively large purchasing group by Hungarian standards. However, apart from the three female leaders, no one else provides work for the group. The leaders work an average of 4–5 hours per month. Pick-ups take place every two weeks. No fee is collected, they have no expenses, and they meet in a space provided free of charge. The suppliers arrive themselves, pack their goods and clean up after themselves. The farmers meet the consumers directly and this also means that there is no need for e.g. packaging, sorting of the products. Consumers pay the farmers directly at the time of collection. When the group started, it was necessary to report to the local district government that such an initiative was in operation, but contacts with public institutions ended there. They do not receive any support from the local or district government, but they do not seek any. It is the farmers who set the prices, the founders have no influence on this. Accepting these prices constitutes a form of support for the producers.

Under the law, farmers are only allowed to sell what they have produced themselves. Farmers cannot sell other people's food unless one acts as a formal intermediary. This is important from the tax point of view. Similarly, the responsibility with regard to hygiene issues, food marketing, is on the farmers' side. The food on sale is not only certified organic, but also from those producers who are open to visits from group members, which means they have nothing to hide. The products are more expensive than in supermarkets, but they compete on price with organic food shops, not with conventional ones.

The group only has a page on FB and does not actively recruit members, but the number of consumers is growing anyway. The limitation is the ability of farmers and producers to provide the appropriate supplies volume.



MOTIVATION

It is the formal group's ambition to revitalise the local economy. The leader's long-term view is that local communities should have their own income, currency.

In 2 years they want to have 6,000 consumers, which would correspond to 5% of the population of the municipality. They plan that in 5 years' time there will be purchasing communities in all Hungarian communities (municipalities) working together. It is also important that everyone has consistent values and goals. The main motives for getting involved in purchasing groups were the desire to source safe and trustworthy food and the desire to buy healthy food. Further down the list was the willingness to support the local economy, local producers. Climate issues were also highlighted, as was, interestingly, strengthening individual local identity. The analyses point out that the consumer behaviour of this social group is closest to the so-called LOHAS (Lifestyle of Health and Sustainability) behaviour pattern. The deliberate care for the environment and health lends a special character to this group. Research shows that purchasing groups¹² are formed in Hungary by well-earning and well-educated people.

SOFTWARE

At the beginning, everyone used Google excel for their activities. Nowadays, many groups use an open source community-based developed software¹³. The entry cost is very low, but then you have to pay about 10 % of the turnover. The working model of this software has been developed on the basis of previous experience. It works similarly to online supermarkets.

An important feature of this software is that it allows credits to be assigned according to the participatory guarantee system developed by the organisation from Nyíregyházi¹⁴.

The author of the software emphasises that it is important to match the logic of the group. They need to know who ordered, what and how much, as well as from whom. The software must also be very simple. The provision of technology is very important for each group. Since it is shared for a fee with other groups in Hungary, a person responsible for its operation can be employed. Individual groups pay according to their turnover, but the use of the software allows them to increase this turnover. Currently, 20 cooperatives – purchasing groups – in Hungary use the software. Each can

customise some of the elements to fit their own needs. The core, however, is common for all.

INSTITUTIONAL ENVIRONMENT

The formal organisation from Nyíregyházi does not have the support of the local government, but it has not sought it, either. It does not want to seek funding from the local authority or other grants, as this would mean that they would not be facing the real world, would not create a business that works. The business model allows it to grow smartly. The organisation provides various types of training to other cooperatives, so that it functions, in a way, as an umbrella organisation for Hungarian cooperatives.

The planned topics for training and knowledge-sharing workshops include:

- Strengthening the quality of the community.
- How to establish a customer community?
- Online shop design – knowledge sharing.
- Technical expertise – knowledge sharing.

The Budapest purchasing group has no support either, nor has it thought of anything of the sort.

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It sometimes benefits from the informal support of the National Association for the Representation of the Interests of Small Livestock Producers and Service Providers¹⁵



Spain

INTRODUCTION

In Spain, cooperative activity is very popular. Many cooperatives are formed to cater for all the needs of the residents, including housing, manufacturing, insurance, credit unions and even architecture. Also the football club FC Barcelona is a cooperative with 175,000 members, who have a say in the operation of the club. In Spain, food cooperatives are mainly, but not exclusively, understood as consumer cooperatives, and more specifically organic consumption cooperatives. The first Spanish consumer groups emerged in the 1990s.

Barcelona is a special city even compared to the rest of Spain, with a very high number of cooperatives, as 8% of the city's GDP is generated within cooperatives. In 2018, it was estimated that in Barcelona alone 1,700 families were members of formal or informal food cooperatives in 59 cooperative groups¹⁶.

In Spain, a distinction is made between two types of cooperatives: cooperativa de consumo – formal ones; and grupos de consumo – informal (small).

In the latter type, different types of products are ordered with varying frequency. Such initiatives resemble purchasing groups; the choice of what to order is limited, especially when it comes to fresh produce. There is even a search engine that allows people who want to join or create their own cooperativo de consumo to look for such groups – these are often shops that operate on a cooperative basis. However, some of them (e.g. in Barcelona) practice ordering and collection of goods on a weekly basis. There is also a form in between

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the original model and purchasing groups, the so-called hives, which are consumer groups managed by a commercial company¹⁷. It operates in a commercial way, but the attitude of the members of the cooperatives towards this form is rather positive, as it promotes, as they say, the shortening of supply chains, the building of local food systems, and thus aligns with the objectives of the organic consumption cooperatives.

ORGANISATION

For an in-depth analysis, we have selected cooperatives operating under different models. The first one we studied is in Barcelona. It has evolved from a collective that was formed during the 2009 protests and established the Community Centre. It comprises a library, an eviction blocking group and a cooperative, among others. The Centre does not receive any subsidies, as it does not want to be dependent on public institutions, although the city has offered various forms of support. The Community Centre's activities are financed by proceeds from the bar that operates during the district's annual big spring fiesta, membership fees and tax deductions. The cooperative is, to some extent, an autonomous entity within this Community Centre.



At the Barcelona cooperative, orders are collected from members and products are dispensed once a week. The smooth operation is ensured by an appropriate software (more on this later). Members of the cooperative pay contributions to the collective as a whole. Expenses are decided collectively. Upon joining the cooperative, a 'deposit' of € 30 is also paid, which can be deducted if an order is not settled. Each family is assigned a task, plus they have to help distribute the food once a month.

The second type of cooperative that has been analysed are cooperative supermarkets, formed by consumers. The supermarkets operate as cooperatives or consumer associations. They describe themselves as spaces where people, rather than large corporations, make decisions about their own food.

One such shop is Som Alimentació¹⁸, a community of people who have come together to create a cooperative and a participatory supermarket in Valencia, designed according to their own criteria. It aims to represent a new model of consumption in which consumers and food producers, rather than big companies, have the decision-making power. They declare that they are aiming for better food through healthier, higher quality products,

mostly local and organic, and offering fair prices to those who consume and those who produce. They want their purchasing choices to contribute to a better world every day. Som Alimentació is a non-profit organisation (Sin Animo De Lucro) and the money the shop earns must be spent according to the decisions of the cooperative's members. If the shop generates a profit, a decision has to be made: whether to invest (and how) in the cooperative or return the money to the members of the cooperative.

In the cooperative itself, no one receives a salary. However, an accountant is employed by the Centre. Meetings of the collective take place once every few months and last for a whole day. In addition, there are team-building meetings, such as a bike trip to visit a farmer. There are many social occasions there, shared meals. Decisions are taken by the assembly, which is convened to decide, e.g. on increasing the number of employees (who may be paid employees who do their work without being members of the cooperative), changing the spending structure or on other activities that require a joint decision. The governing board (elected every two years) makes the final, strategic decisions.

The products sold in the Barcelona cooperative are more expensive than those available in supermarkets, and there are no sales promotions. Prices rise faster in the cooperative than in other shops. The organisations we have studied pay VAT, so the farmers who work with them should have their own businesses registered. If they do not have them, a solution is sought. Members of the cooperative pay contributions to the collective as a whole.

Every member of the cooperative (shop) operating in Valencia must purchase a cooperative voucher worth €50. This is a one-off fee, refundable in the event of resignation from membership (possibly covering any potential arrears). In addition, the member decides on a regular contribution to the cooperative. The options are: 4 hours of work per month for the cooperative (in various capacities, including work in the shop) or a fee of €6 per month. The cooperative shop operates daily during the same hours as most shops. The shop can be used by anyone, whether they have membership status or not. Every product available in the shop has two prices – a higher price for non-members and about 15% lower for members.



The products sold in the Barcelona cooperative do not have to be certified organic, but they must be organic. There is a discussion among members as to what these criteria should be.

The key supplier is a farmer by choice who moved out of Barcelona 10 years ago, as did most of the farmers who supply the cooperative. They were motivated by a desire to change their lifestyle, to escape the big city. The main farmer is both a producer and an intermediary. He is happy to provide information on cultivation methods and the production of his products or the products of other farmers. For the members of the cooperative, labour issues are also important, but they do not know what indicators to adopt, and there are not enough people to handle this.

Cooperative shops most often work with suppliers who use official organic certifications, but they also accept alternative certifications, which in Valencia are called SPGs (Sistemas Participativos de Garantía).

There are three models of co-op shops in Spain:

- Pure model: these are shops where only members who have to work 3 hours each month can shop. They do not charge any fees. Everyone has to do different tasks such as checkout, organising the warehouse, cleaning the shop, serving customers, etc. This is a way to reduce costs, get lower prices and involve the community in the operation of the supermarket. A minimum number of members is needed to guarantee that all tasks are covered.
- Mixed model: members of these cooperatives can choose between two types of cooperation, paying a fee (between €3 and €8 depending on the cooperative) or doing the work themselves (3 or 4 hours). Usually, most members choose to pay a fee because it is easier and people usually argue that they do not have time to work in the cooperative.
- Traditional model: these cooperatives do not have regular work for members. Typically, their members have to work 2 or 4 hours a year (token work) or make a contribution (about €20). All work is managed by hired staff.

MOTIVATION

The goals that members of the cooperatives set for themselves are quite radical, as they say that they aim for independence from global networks and want to fight against liberal capitalism. Issues of individual wellbeing, such as one's own health, body, are further down the list. The collective within which the cooperative operates has grown up around the issue of eviction, homelessness and continues to try to reach out to the excluded. As the housing problem in Barcelona is still severe, evictions still happen quite often. The support group is constantly working. It is deliberating on how to sustain the goals of the 2008 protests. They aim to create a space to build a self-organised neighbourhood in anticipation of the revolution. Their actions thus allude to the aims of the Second Republic. The members of the collective are continuously educating themselves, especially in areas including all aspects of eviction, anti-racist action, feminism. However, the cooperative itself does not have the resources to support the excluded, such as refugees. Within the initiative, the cooperative has a reputation of 'rich snobs', as its members are relatively wealthier than other members of the collective. The respondent described them as cooperative middle class. Many of these people



work in cooperatives of various types. There are 40 families in the cooperative and the entire collective has about 100 members.

The Valencia shop's website says that Som Alimentació is a community of people coming together to create a participatory supermarket in the city, designed according to their own criteria – a new model of consumption in which the people who consume and produce the food, rather than the big companies, have the power to decide.

They are committed to eating better with better quality, healthier, mainly local and organic products and to offering fair prices to consumers and producers. All of this is intended to contribute to the building of a better world.

SOFTWARE

The Barcelona cooperative uses an open source programme (aplicoop) that works like an online supermarket. Some components turn on and off depending on whether they are available. 5% of what everyone spends is allocated to the cooperative's expenses.

Cooperative supermarkets usually use one of the two versions: FoodCoops – sourced from La Louve (Paris), <https://github.com/AwesomeFoodCoops>;

CoopItEasy – sourced from Bees supermarket (Brussels), <https://github.com/coopiteasy>.

Odoo is based on modules (accounting, inventory, contacts, sales, email marketing, etc.). The differences lie in the members module, which is a specific module developed for cooperative supermarkets in France. They have different ways of controlling members (registration, changes, etc.). The rest is the same.

In Spain, each supermarket decides which module it wants to use, as is the case in France. There are different IT companies that implement different versions in each country. The cooperatives in each country can use these tools.

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Italy

A clear distinction must be made between GAS (Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale) and cooperatives proper. Solidarity purchasing groups (GAS), which we focused on in our research, are informal groups of citizens who meet and organise themselves to buy food or everyday products together. Purchases are made according to the principle of solidarity, which tends to favour small and local producers who respect the environment and the people with whom they establish a direct relationship.

These groups are characterised by the following adjectives: small, local and supportive, acting in solidarity. Small in order to facilitate simple organisation and foster relationships between members; local in order to strengthen the bond between citizens and the territory in which they live. A purchasing group becomes a group acting in solidarity when it decides to use the concept of solidarity as a guiding criterion for the selection of products, suppliers. Solidarity starts with the

members of the group and extends to the small producers supplying the products, to respect for the environment, and to the people of the global south. Climate issues are also important, the concept of 'zero-mile democracy' has even emerged, which refers to taking root in the local economy and reducing food transport.

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The term 'acting in solidarity' (*solidale*) is intended to distinguish GAS from purely commercial purchasing groups. They are based on the concept of critical consumerism, i.e. making informed purchasing decisions based on various criteria, including environmental impact and support for the local economy. The founders of GAS declare an interest in jointly creating a new lifestyle model – informed consumption, closer social relations, frugality, responsibility. In addition to ongoing self-help activities to support local farmers, various campaign activities also take place, e.g. in 2009, after the powerful earthquake, in the region where the epicentre had been, a meeting of the GAS federation was organised to boost local farms.

HISTORY

The first GAS was established in 1994. In 1997, the first network of purchasing groups was created with the aim of bringing together different groups, exchanging information about products and producers and spreading the idea of purchasing groups. In 1999, a basic document¹⁹ was produced, including a definition of what a GAS is, a description of why it is important to set one up,



how to organise oneself and information on the planned developments.

ORGANISATION

GAS are usually fairly small, between 20 and 100 families. They are often formed by splitting up existing ones when these become too large. Some evolve into cooperatives. GAS activities mainly focus on food products, but organic cosmetics and even locally produced clothing can also be sourced there. Since 2020, solidarity-guided energy communities have also been developing on the basis of existing GAS²⁰.

For both food and energy GAS, the aspect of relationships, the ties between members and also with suppliers, is crucial. The GAS are most often based solely on voluntary work. Each member is obliged to work a certain number of hours for the community, is often assigned a regular task and sometimes provides his or her own space. Individual GAS are managed democratically.

Cristina Grasseni's observation on the principle of solidarity is important. Although time-consuming, GAS's reflections on the practical application of the solidarity principle are tantamount to building political skills. The principle of solidarity is explicitly invoked in group meetings, both of the individual purchasing group and at the national assembly level²¹. Most often, each member of the GAS is responsible for procurement, contacts with one supplier (there were more than a dozen suppliers in the GAS we studied), and organises deliveries for a specific day. Pick-ups are usually organised in members' private spaces, sometimes in public places.

PRODUCTS

The products that are purchased at GAS are almost exclusively Italian. The organisers of the groups try to recruit producers locally – from a particular region (for climatic reasons, to reduce transport, but also out of concern for the local economy). Only when products are not available are they sought in other regions of Italy, e.g. citrus fruits are only available in the south. Some GAS do not sell products from outside Italy, but there are some that sell food from other continents,

although these too must meet sustainable production and fair-trade criteria. The products available in GAS do not have to be certified organic, but they must meet the requirements set by the individual groups – the participatory guarantee system²². In the case of GAS LOLA, for example, the rules are carefully written down in five pages. Among other things, they point out that the product has to travel as few kilometres as possible – the 0 km rule. They have to be produced organically or biodynamically. Respect for workers' rights and fiscal transparency are important criteria. Each supplier must declare compliance with the above criteria in a form on the GAS website. Contact with each supplier is the responsibility of one of the GAS members, who is expected to visit the farm once in a while and verify the information provided by the producer. Suppliers must declare family relationships with GAS members to ensure impartiality of selection.



SOCIAL STRUCTURE

The respondents described GAS as a unique group of people, in the sense that not only do they appreciate local food, but they also care about the values of the solidarity economy. Being a member of GAS requires dedicating more time, attentiveness, patience than shopping in commercial shops, at the same time the products sold there, although of high quality, are often relatively expensive, because the rule is not to negotiate prices with farmers, suppliers. In the interviews an opinion appeared that GAS members are representatives of the lower middle class, in contrast to, for example, Slow Food members. Grasseni's research²³ shows that in 2012 there was \$110 million worth of purchases made through GAS, she estimated at the time that 100,000 Italians were involved in this type of activity in 800 groups. Between 2018 and 2020, however, purchases through GAS appear to be on the rise (+2.3%), covering 12.3% of the Italian population in the pre-pandemic period²⁴

GAS members are also more knowledgeable than Italian residents on average about food production methods, certifications (organic or fair trade), seasonality and other aspects of sustainable food systems.

SOFTWARE

Some GAS use a mobile application²⁵, which is easy to download.

From the description, it appears that „With the app, GAS members can place orders, consult the orders placed and view their accounting situation. In addition, every time there is a deadline or change related to orders (opening, expiry, delivery, etc.), the user will receive a real-time notification.“

INSTITUTIONAL ENVIRONMENT

The local government declares an interest in their initiative and a willingness to support it, but so far, apart from the declarations, not much has come of it. Often GAS are in contact with local organisations, not necessarily only with other GAS, e.g. one of the surveyed organisations cooperates with a cooperative that helps addicts and produces food. The GAS surveyed buys raw materials and processed food from this cooperative. The organisation is in the process of transforming itself into a cooperative shop and is looking for inspiration from, inter alia, the experience of the Brooklyn cooperative.

GAS activities are facilitated by a number of networking organisations. The main tools supporting the national network include the *economiasolidale.net* website²⁶ and its mailing list. There are a number of local (DES) or regional (RES) networks, which include active local GAS together with other actors in the area. Their aim is to coordinate some of the products and organise joint initiatives. Since 2014, the National Solidarity Economy Meetings (INES) have helped to verify the practices, share solutions, define longer- and shorter-term goals.

Solidarity Economy Districts (DES) are the local networks of this economy, the basic kernels on which the networking strategy is based. They connect the actors of the solidarity economy in an area, i.e. GAS, producers and suppliers, associations. They facilitate the circulation of ideas, information, products and services. DES, in turn, belong to the Italian Solidarity Economy Network (RIES)²⁷. This is a relatively new organisation, in operation since 2020, which is a second-tier support network for the solidarity economy, which means that it brings together members of other networks and organisations. Its aim is to promote Social Solidarity initiatives in Italy. It was established following the experience that shows that the solidarity economy needs representation and cooperation with

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other actors in order to become a viable alternative to the prevailing economic model. Its activities are based on 3 pillars: research and training, territorial cooperation and the organisation of national conventions.



Analysis of the key dimensions of food cooperatives activities

MOTIVATION, SOCIAL BASE

What shape a social, civic initiative takes depends very much on the motivation of those who want to create it. Exploring what inspires action around a seemingly mundane issue such as food, what makes people face difficulties, sometimes even failures, in order to build cooperative communities, can reveal their diversity, as well as the values important to the members of each cooperative.

According to Janusz Reykowski, motivation is a behavioural mechanism of an individual leading to the attainment of certain states of affairs that are

important to him, inducing him to perform activities that determine the attainment of the goals²⁸. Motivation arises as a result of an unfulfilled need. This, in turn, gives rise to a sense of necessity to satisfy that need. Sometimes needs can be fulfilled individually, sometimes at a civic, social level. In order to satisfy these needs, individuals or groups must decide through which activities they will achieve their goal.

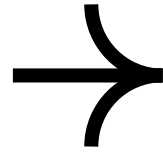
Cooperative research pays attention to both individual and group motivation. One does not exclude



the other, and often they even complement each other. The literature of the subject provides information on individual motivations, which refer to taking care of one's own safety, the health of oneself and one's loved ones, taking care of the body²⁹. Collective motives which are mentioned in research studies include issues related to the environment, social justice, sustainability, caring for cultural heritage, etc.³⁰.

As will be shown, motivation depends on circumstances, social conditions, history and traditions. The chapter on research methods briefly outlines the main differences, especially between the Central and Eastern European countries – represented here by Hungary and Czechia – and the Southern European countries – here, Italy and Spain.

The motivation for the Hungarian cooperatives, which are referred to as purchasing clubs, can be described as a desire to cure the local economy. Through the development of purchasing clubs, the cooperativists we surveyed want as much added value as possible from food and cosmetics production to remain in Hungary, preferably in a specific region. Due to the fact that not everything that modern consumers seek is produced in Hungary, some deviation from this principle is allowed.



Carrying out activities in cooperatives

requires a new model of consumption

Consequently, some purchasing clubs want to transform themselves into shops where local products will dominate, supplemented only by goods from outside Hungary. So, on the one hand, we have a strongly articulated form of local or national patriotism, on the other hand, a reference to the principles behind the development of short food chains, such as environmental issues, buying in-season, locally produced products, transporting food over short distances. The desire to create



local shops also stems from the discontent with the dominance of global sales chains, and at the same time the desire to support the Hungarian economy.

In Czechia, the prevailing motivation is the search for healthy food and reducing the use of packaging, mainly plastic, under the banner of zero waste. The latter is important to such an extent that on many occasions we ended up in commercial zero waste shops which were recommended to us precisely as cooperative shops. The surveyed members of food cooperatives, including farmers, are driven by discontent with the poor quality of commonly offered food and cosmetic products. In their view, the prevailing food systems offer low-quality food that may even be harmful. Good food is a broad concept; in the case of the Prague cooperative, it is defined according to organic farming certification. However, in the case of Tisnov, good food was defined more subjectively, not through formal certification (more on this in the section 'Product selection criteria'). When looking for good food, participants in the cooperatives declared the need to take care of their bodies and the health of themselves and their loved ones. Farmers, on the other hand, said how important the welfare of their animals was

to them, and that also translated into the quality of the meat they produced. They emphasised that they wanted to provide the same thing for their families as for the members of the cooperatives, namely good quality food. The idea of zero waste, which has been emphasised and implemented at every stage, stems from the need to take care of the environment, to reduce the waste of plastic and other packaging. Due to hygiene regulations, selling food entails additional difficulties and extra work, but this is so important that those involved in the cooperatives make these efforts (with varying degrees of success).

In Spain and Italy, we are dealing with motives of a more pronounced societal and social nature. The very name of the Solidarity Purchasing Group reveals the main motive. The groups are founded on the concept of critical consumerism, i.e. making informed purchasing decisions based on a variety of criteria, including environmental impact, support for the local economy and ensuring decent working conditions for farmers. The founders of GAS declare their interest in contributing to the creation of a new lifestyle – informed consumption, closer relationships, savings, responsibility. Solidarity starts with the members of the group and extends to the small producers who supply the products,

to respect for the environment, to the peoples of the southern hemisphere.

In Spain, those involved in cooperatives say they want to become independent from global retail chains. They aim to create a new model of consumption in which it is the people who consume and produce food, rather than the big companies, who have the power to decide. Some, here Barcelona stands out in particular, are more radical, saying they want to fight liberal capitalism. One of the organisations we interviewed says it has grown out of the wave of protests of 2008 (which were triggered by the economic and housing crisis) and wants to continue to push for a fairer economic and food system. It is committed to leading actions that will create a self-organised neighbourhood, with the idea that this is preparation for a major revolution. Such radical voices are rare, however, nevertheless a common motivation for cooperatives is the clearly articulated need to change the food system.

On the FB of the umbrella organisation for Spanish cooperative supermarkets, you can read a pre-Christmas post, a proclamation that illustrates the motives of those who act in cooperatives, „We need to fix the world. Christmas is the



time of year when everything is geared towards consuming more. And we need the opposite, to consume less and better. That's why we've launched a competition to inspire the world with recipes for cooking with less [adverse impact on the climate]. More local, greener, fairer, healthier. Let's create the best Christmas agro-ecological recipe."

It is important to remember that, regardless of the country, members of cooperatives, both consumers and producers, represent a specific group in social terms. One of the GAS members interviewed said of its members that they are a social bubble within a bubble, for they are people who not only appreciate local food, but also the logic of the solidarity economy and, consequently, certain constraints and burdens. Being a member of GAS, but also of all the other initiatives analysed here, requires the allocation of more time, attention, social trust, flexibility than shopping in commercial shops. At the same time, the products sold in cooperatives, although of high quality, are often relatively expensive, because the rule is not to negotiate prices with farmers, suppliers. Activists are often representatives of the lower middle class, unlike, for example, Slow Food members, who usually belong to the upper middle class. The situation

is no different in Czechia and Hungary – here, too, cooperative activists are relatively wealthy, very well educated people, often with young children. In Spain, one interviewee described the members of her cooperative as belonging to the cooperative middle class. In that country, there are enough jobs in cooperatives of all kinds to form such a social group.

The implementation of activities in the cooperative model arises from a set of needs that are different from the prevailing consumption model. It requires inventing one's own model from scratch. In all countries, those taking action within consumer and producer communities decide to make a big effort and a big time commitment, because they have to reconstruct and take over practices and actions from the prevailing model of consumption.

ORGANISATIONAL SOLUTIONS

Different motives, different formal conditions, including regulations on sales, food marketing, different financial resources, all that means that cooperatives operate differently in each country. Moreover, their mode of operation also differs within each country. However, taking into account the size of this study, we will focus on the organisational solutions prevalent in each country (see Table 1).

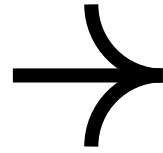
There are two forms of making purchases within the cooperatives we examined. There are shops that can be used by everyone (the Prague shop is an exception), and members of the cooperative or association enjoy various types of discounts. The second type, popular in Italy and partly in Hungary, involves ordering products through various online tools, sending the requests in advance to the producers and picking up the products at a designated place and time. It is usually informal groups that operate in this way, also the space where the collection takes place in this formula is either a public or a private space. The private space includes homes, gardens, basements of community members. In one of the communities surveyed, it was the supplier who made his production hall available free of charge for weekly pick-ups. Quite



often, public institutions – mainly schools – provided some part of their space or at least a car park for pick-ups.

Activity in any type of cooperative entails the expectation that everyone will put in some work, as well as some financial resources, into its development, its day-to-day activities. The funds make it possible to pay, depending on the organisational formula, rent, people working in the shop, cleaning products, expenses that arise in emergency situations. In addition, the money collected serves as a solidarity fund in case a member of the co-operative, including the producer, has temporary financial difficulties. The amount of these contributions is relatively small.

With the exception of one case, members are everywhere required to commit a certain amount of time to the day-to-day activities of the cooperative. Depending on the organisational formula, the work that volunteers do ranges from cleaning the common areas, working in the shop, organising extra events to contacting farmers, producers and sometimes the local authorities. In many cases, the more one works, the greater the discount on purchases, but it is also possible to pay a financial equivalent instead of hours worked.



Being a member of a cooperative **allows**

**to be a subject
of change**

People engaged in cooperatives are also required to attend community meetings and participate in deciding on the day-to-day operations, as well as on strategic decisions (e.g. whether to set up shop, buy space to operate). In Spain, decisions are most often taken by the assembly. The governing board (elected every two years) makes the final, strategic decisions. In contrast, in the Barcelona cooperative the structure is flat. Meetings are held every 3 months, decisions are taken collectively, but

some work is done in working groups. In Czechia, the members of the association make decisions collectively with the board in meetings or, more often, during online discussions. The day-to-day decisions are made by the shop group at meetings every 2 weeks.



Being a member of a cooperative is a kind of privilege – it allows you to be part of the change, a community of people sharing similar values and vision of the world. It is also a privilege to be able to make decisions about the organisation's operation. On a practical level, privileges include various discounts on the products offered by the cooperative.

SOFTWARE

The operation of cooperatives, like almost everything in today's world, is based on information technology. As with food chains, cooperatives are advocating a move away from the prevailing, corporate technology tools towards open source, self-financing instruments. Using these technologies, cooperatives are obliged to contribute a small percentage of turnover to their maintenance.

The Barcelona cooperative uses APLI COOP. It works just like any other online supermarket. Each member has their own 'piggy bank' – a kind of prepayment – and it is from this that current purchases are paid for. 5% of what the consumer spends goes towards the cooperative's expenses. The association of cooperative shops in Spain, on the other hand, uses the following tools and encourages their

use: <https://odoo-community.org/about>, <https://github.com/coopiteasy>. Co-operatives from other countries can also use this software, it is only necessary to translate and adapt it to the needs of individual organisations. The software is open source. Reaching out for these solutions allows co-operatives to become part of a larger community, as well as to build relationships with those using them. The community version is based on LibreOffice. The cooperative's activists want more cooperatives to work with this software, as it is yet another way to integrate people with similar goals, values and forms of operation.

Italian chains use the Go!Gas app, by Davide Lorusso. The Hungarian ones, on the other hand, have developed their own software based on their experience, it is also open source: <https://shop.nyiregyhazikosar.hu/blog/tmr-rendszer>. Initially, you have to cover a small operating cost, but then you have to pay about 10% of the turnover.

ANCILLARY ACTIVITIES

In the section on motivation, it was pointed out that, for the members of the cooperatives, shopping is not an end in itself; rather, this end

is a change understood in different ways. Consequently, the primary activity of shopping is accompanied by a variety of other activities. Almost all of the surveyed organisations carry out integration activities in the form of meetings, visits to farmers. Some cooperatives provide support to refugees (the survey was conducted a few months after Russia's attack on Ukraine). One Hungarian group operated what can be described as suspended shopping. Each week, one supplier was appointed, from whom individuals could order and pay for more than they needed themselves; the surplus was transferred to a different refugee family each week. One of the Czech cooperatives shares a community kitchen next to the community garden – and once a week they cook together with refugees.

One of the GAS surveyed raised funds to promote the idea of short food chains, sustainable production among people outside the GAS. In Spain, self-education groups are often active, undertaking cooperation with other cooperative actors. In both Czechia and Spain, as the cooperative sector is developed, many members of food cooperatives also participate in other forms of cooperatives, taking action, for example, to stop evictions or develop energy cooperatives.

2

Cooperatives in practice



Analysis of the key dimensions of food cooperatives activities

COUNTRY + ESTIMATED NUMBER OF COOPERATIVES	NAME	DECISION-MAKING STRUCTURE	CURRENT FORM OF ACTIVITY	CONTRIBUTIONS	FORMS OF PARTICIPATION	ANCILLARY ACTIVITIES	SOFTWARE
HUNGARY (30)	informal consumer purchasing groups (more) or associations. In one case, a marketplace	Decisions are made by those most involved (this is the practice), although everyone is invited	Ordering and dispensing of orders in an informal space once every 2 weeks or once a week (more frequently). The second form, more infrequent, is a shop	In the less formalized cooperative (Budapest in our study), there are no contributions, in most groups it is 10% of turnover	Voluntary - on average half of the members work on a voluntary basis, occasionally someone is employed	Training for other cooperatives	https://shop.nyiregy-hazikosar.hu/blog/tmr-rendszer , this is open source, the cost of joining is very low, but then you have to pay about 10% of your turnover.
CZECHIA (2)	Associations	Decisions are taken by the association's board after consultation	A shop	Fees are collected because the association does not want any external investor, it wants to have a democratic decision-making structure. It also has a solidarity fund paid for by other members for the benefit of people who cannot afford to pay their fees.	Combination of volunteer work and employed persons	Integration of members, action in support of refugees by community kitchen	Working on solutions
SPAIN The Spanish Confederation of Consumer and User Cooperatives, which has been operating since 1990 and brings together a total of 175 consumer cooperatives across Spain, and these in turn, since 2018, have represented more than 5.5 million members and more than 45,000 employees.	Cooperativo de consumo – these are often shops, 'hives', or groups; grupos de consumo - informal (small) consumer groups managed by a company https://lacolp.menaquedicesi.es/es	Decisions are taken by the assembly. The governing board (elected every 2 years) makes the final, strategic decisions	Ordering and dispensing of orders in an informal space or much more often a shop	Various solutions, including: contributions and 5% of the order goes to the cooperative (Barcelona); a €50 cooperative voucher. This is a one-off fee, refundable in the event of cancellation of membership (possibly covering potential arrears)	Combination of volunteer work and employed persons	Integration, education, cooperation with other cooperative organisations	FoodCoops: comes from La Louve (Paris): https://github.com/Awesome-FoodCoops CoopItEasy: comes from Bees supermarket (Brussels): https://github.com/coopiteasy , or https://odoo-community.org/about
ITALY (in 2012 there were 800 GAS, just before the pandemic 12% of Italian citizens declared that they were involved in GAS activities*)	GAS, informal	They strive to ensure that decisions are taken by everyone in a democratic manner	Ordering and dispensing of orders in an informal space	No membership fees	100% voluntary work	Integration, promotion of the GAS idea of shortening supply chains among non-GAS audiences	Go!Gas https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=eu.aequos.gapp&hl=it&pli=1

Table 1. Summary of organisational arrangements

SOURCE: Authors' own compilation



PRODUCT SELECTION CRITERIA

One of the objectives of all the initiatives surveyed is to support farmers, small producers in the process of producing quality food. Food quality is a relative concept with multiple meanings. The definition of what food quality is changes depending on the social context, on who constructs it and for what purpose. Each person in the supply chain assesses quality in slightly different terms. A retailer will focus more on visual attributes, while government officials will emphasise health and safety issues. Most consumers pay attention to freshness, nutritional value and taste. The consumers and producers we surveyed – members of cooperatives – tend to be more informed and therefore more demanding participants in food chains. They want to know exactly what they are buying, what impact their purchasing decisions have on the world around them, the climate, the environment, other people. Cooperatives define what good quality food is for them in different ways. For some cooperatives, including some of the cooperative shops in Spain, this benchmark is the organic farming certification. For many of the organisations we surveyed, these official certifications are not good enough, as they do not take into account important issues such as social issues, for

example the form of employment of farm workers. It is quite common to hear that farmers give up this type of certification or do not apply for it at all, as obtaining and retaining it involves extensive bureaucracy, and it does not take into account some of the agricultural practices that are good for the climate and the society, such as regenerative agriculture. Finally, some of the more radical cooperatives reject these certificates, considering them to be forms of hegemony imposed by public institutions.

Most of the entities we surveyed have introduced their own Participatory Guarantee Systems or are considering them. As defined by IFOAM³¹ they are „local quality assurance systems. They certify producers on the basis of active stakeholder participation and are built on a foundation of trust, social networks and knowledge sharing“. This means that each cooperative can create its own set of democratically agreed indicators, referring, e.g. to the production method, the place of sourcing raw materials, the treatment of workers, the carbon footprint generated. The consistent use of such a system serves as a guideline as to what criteria to use when looking for suppliers, who to work with, what to expect from farmers. Producers, on the other hand, may see it as a manual on how to

develop, what to look for in production. Farmers from cooperatives with whom we spoke emphasised the importance of contact with consumers, not least because they learn what is important to consumers when they choose products in cooperatives, what to pay particular attention to in the production process. Such a participatory guarantee system is a set of needs and expectations of cooperative members with respect to the goods they purchase. It can also be seen more broadly as a manifestation of the values that guide individual cooperatives.

Some Italian GAS participatory guarantee schemes include the following criteria: the product has to travel the fewest possible number of kilometres (following the 0 km rule); ecological or biodynamic production methods; respect for workers' rights; fiscal transparency. Each supplier must declare these elements in a form on the GAS website. Contact with each supplier is the responsibility of one of the GAS members, who is expected to visit the farm once in a while and verify the information provided by the producer. Suppliers must also declare any family relationships with GAS members to ensure impartiality of selection.



There are many forms of such certificates and they are applied differently. The most elaborate system that we have been able to find comes from Hungary (see Table 2). Its authors stated that they had created it because they wanted to maintain partnership relations with their suppliers. Their products must be organic, but not necessarily with a European organic certificate. Products are rated on a scale from 1 to 5, where 5 is the best rating and 1 is the worst. The higher a product is on the scale, the better. For the developers of this system, its educational function is extremely important.

On the scale, the producer himself evaluates the production methods and the impact on the local economy, other elements are evaluated by the consumer group.

In order to use this system, certain data is required so that the aspects in the table can be properly interpreted. In purchasing communities, manufacturer reviews and product descriptions can provide guidance. In the case of shop products, the data on their labels plays such a role. In the surveyed community, it is possible to buy products mainly from the upper end of the point range. However, in order to provide the widest possible selection and thus encourage consumers to engage with

their cooperative, products with lower scores are also sold.

The above participatory guarantee schemes are only examples, each institution can create its own, based on the specificities of the organisation, the location, but also the motivation of the members of the respective groups. In the Hungarian and Italian examples, the motivation of the members of the organisations in both countries, as described in the relevant section, is evident. The Italians pay attention in their system to labour rights, to issues of social solidarity, without overlooking environmental issues. Whereas in the Hungarian example, the emphasis on local economic development and climate issues is clearly visible.

INSTITUTIONAL ENVIRONMENT

Cooperatives do not operate in an institutional vacuum. Their functioning is determined, to a greater or lesser extent, by national legislation, cooperation with other similar organisations, as well as with the public sector. It is only possible to realise the goals and missions of cooperatives when they step out of their niche and enter into cooperation with other actors. This often involves

some compromises, but their development is only possible when they function in relationships with other social players. From the point of view of the logic of the common, it is necessary to reconcile different needs and visions of the world in order to protect and develop the common. The power and potential to implement the changes that cooperatives propose depends, among other things, on the number of people involved. Cooperatives are usually relatively small organisations; only when they join together in networks can they become a partner in discussions with local governments, other public and commercial institutions. At the same time, the day-to-day activities of individual cooperatives depend on good communication with other cooperatives and organisations. This is why networking of cooperatives is so important. The essence of networking is, as Simon Peres pointed out, that the whole is more than the sum of the parts. Networking, the creation of federations, makes it possible to take care of those issues, to solve problems, something for which a single organisation does not have the resources. It is as much about material resources – shared financial resources, premises, technology – as it is about knowledge, ideas, mutual support and motivating each other to act.

2

Cooperatives
in practice



Analysis
of the key
dimensions
of food
cooperatives
activities

Shortening food chains is one of the main objectives of the European Union's strategy, From Field to Fork. The actions of cooperatives have preceded these proposals by many years. This strategy is, in part, the legitimisation of the further development of the most radical forms of shortening food chains. It can facilitate fundraising for the development of cooperatives, discussions with local governments and other public actors. All the more reason why this should be a good time for networking of all the bodies that seek to shorten food chains.

Italy and Spain have by far more cooperatives but also more umbrella organisations than Central and Eastern European countries. We notice a synergy here, cooperatives form because there are various forms of institutional support available for them, as well as networks of cooperatives. At the same time, if there were too few cooperatives, federations or other forms of umbrella organisations intended for them would not be formed.

5
punktów

4
punkty

3
punkty

2
punkty

1
punkt

OWNER'S HEADQUARTERS	PLACE OF ORIGIN OF THE MAIN COMPONENT	PRODUCTION METHOD	FORM OF PROCESSING	WASTE GENERATION
The same municipality, county	Produced by the manufacturer or locally	Biodynamic or organic	Handcrafted (handmade) products without additives (e.g. to increase flavour or improve texture)	No packaging or returnable packaging
A nearby part of the country, the nearest region	Produced in Hungary	Conventional, but small farms using both organic and inorganic fertilisers	Use of refrigeration or high temperatures as a preservative	Packaging is needed but recyclable
Adjacent region	A small proportion of this component comes from abroad	Precision farming	Food industry product; contains additives	Packaging is needed but not reusable/degradable (e.g. polystyrene)
The whole country	Most of it comes from abroad	Conventional farming	Artificial additives predominate	Too much packaging that is not recyclable
Abroad	All of it comes from abroad	Use of GMOs	Ingredients may be genetically modified	Non-recyclable multi-material packaging (e.g. Tetra packs)

Table 2. Hungarian certification system

SOURCE <https://kosarkozosseg.hu/>



There are a number of umbrella organisations in Spain, one of which is La Red de Supermercados Cooperativos (The Cooperative Supermarkets Network)³² The Cooperative Supermarkets Network is a national association that brings together cooperative supermarkets to promote a model of fair, sustainable and democratic food distribution and consumption, as they declare on their website. The network, which was founded in 2022, has 11 cooperative supermarkets from all over Spain, integrating more than 11,000 consumers in total. They want to increase the number of members, eventually including other types of cooperatives, too. The aim of the Cooperative Supermarket Network is to help its members consolidate and grow. Therefore, the association makes available a number of services and spaces where activities are carried out for its members, such as providing spaces for exchange, cooperation and advice for better management of individual cooperatives. In addition, it makes available or facilitates the implementation of software for cooperative shops. It fosters relationships between the different actors so that they shop together, share knowledge on both practical and formal issues, etc. It cooperates with other organisations implementing the 'critical consumption philosophy', creating a representation of institutions with similar objectives and working methods.

Their website emphasises, „We are a vehicle for food transformation... We forge alliances with other organisations and sister networks and highlight the philosophy of critical and conscious consumption.“ It further reads, „One supermarket changes a neighbourhood, thousands of supermarkets change the world... Food is a right, not a business that is above people and the planet.“

The Cooperative Supermarkets Network is part of the Network of Alternative and Solidarity Economy (REAS)³³. This institution was created in 1995 to develop the solidarity economy in Spain. It refers to the principles and values of the Charter of the Solidarity Economy³⁴, to act with respect and care for the environment, to promote a model of solidarity and cooperation and to „put people and their needs above profitability and profit“. It is a powerful institution, bringing together almost 1,000 cooperative entities from all over Spain. Its activities include political advocacy with the aim to promote an economic model that is alternative to the prevailing one. Another organisation that supports the activities of cooperatives in Andalusia is Consumo Responde³⁵, which facilitates access to knowledge for consumers, including on how to participate in cooperatives.

Italy, with its powerful cooperative sector and informal GAS cooperatives, is another country where umbrella organisations for the sector have long been established. The purchasing groups (GAS) are networked to assist them and facilitate the information exchange between the different organisations. The main tools supporting the national network are the economiasolidale.net³⁶ website and its mailing list. There are a number of local (DES) or regional (RES) networks that include local active GAS together with other actors in the area, in order to coordinate some of the products and organise joint initiatives. Since 2014, the National Solidarity Economy Meetings (INES) have helped to verify practices, share solutions, identify longer- and shorter-term goals.

DES districts are the local networks of solidarity economy, the basic kernels on which the networking strategy is based. They connect the actors of the solidarity economy in a territory, i.e. GAS, producers and suppliers, associations. They facilitate the circulation of ideas, information, products and services. DES, in turn, belong to the Italian Solidarity Economy Network (RIES)³⁷. This is a relatively new organisation, in operation since 2020, it is

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a second-tier support network for the solidarity economy, which means that it brings together members of other networks and organisations. Its aim is to promote Social Solidarity initiatives in Italy. It was established following the experience that shows that the solidarity economy needs representation and cooperation with other actors in order to become a viable alternative to the prevailing economic model. Its activities are based on 3 pillars: research and training, territorial cooperation and the organisation of national conventions.

The situation in Hungary and Czechia is quite different from the one outlined above. There are no cooperative networks. One of the Hungarian cooperatives we surveyed tries to act as a networking body by organising various types of training for interested cooperatives. In Czechia, so far the number of cooperatives is too small to have a need for formalised networks. An organisation that to

some extent supports the development of different types of short food chains and a fair economy is AMPI³⁸. Our respondents in Hungary and Czechia have declared that they are interested in building a European or regional umbrella for sharing practical experience, lobbying to build an alternative economic model, but also motivating each other to act. This is particularly important here, where there are so few cooperative entities.

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ CSA – Community Supported Agriculture.
- ² https://kpzinfo.cz/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/0457_pro-bio_kpz_skl_420x140-1-str.jpg.
- ³ <https://obziva.cz/>
- ⁴ <https://tisnovskaspizirna.cz/>.
- ⁵ <https://hojnost.org/kdo-jsme/>.
- ⁶ <https://obziva.cz/>.
- ⁷ Researcher's unpublished data.
- ⁸ <https://kosarkozosseg.hu>.
- ⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Cultural_Creatives.
- ¹⁰ <https://www.linkedin.com/business/talent/blog/learning-and-development/community-based-learning-creates-cycle-of-learning-belonging-and-engagement>.
- ¹¹ <https://www.businessmodelsinc.com/en/inspiration/tools/business-model-canvas>
- ¹² <https://www.deturope.eu/getpdf.php?mag=det&vol=2019&no=1&artid=4>.
- ¹³ <https://shop.nyiregyhazikosar.hu/blog/tmr-rendszer>.
- ¹⁴ <https://kosarkozosseg.hu/>.
- ¹⁵ <https://kisleptek.hu/en/information-in-english/>
- ¹⁶ <https://www.20minutos.es/noticia/3441214/0/que-son-grupos-consumo-como-funcionan-colmenas>.
- ¹⁷ <https://lacolmenaquedicesi.es/es>.
- ¹⁸ <https://somalimentacio.com/>.
- ¹⁹ https://economysolidale.net/sites/default/files/allegati/1999_Gas_DocumentoBase.pdf.
- ²⁰ <https://rete-ries.it/formazione/comunita-energetiche-rinnovabili-e-solidali/>.
- ²¹ C. Grasseni, Seeds of trust. Italy's Gruppi di Acquisto Solidale (Solidarity Purchase Groups), „Journal of Political Ecology” 2014, nr 21(1), doi: 10.2458/v21i1.21131.
- ²² <https://www.ifoam.bio/our-work/how/standards-certification/participatory-guarantee-systems>.
- ²³ C. Grasseni, Seeds of trust...
- ²⁴ <https://osservatoriocoesionesociale.eu/osservatorio/il-consumo-responsabile-in-italia-i-primi-dati-dellindagine-2020/>.
- ²⁵ <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=eu.aequos.gapp&hl=it&pli=1>.
- ²⁶ <https://economysolidale.net/>.
- ²⁷ <https://rete-ries.it/>.
- ²⁸ J. Reykowski, Z zagadnień procesu motywacji, WSiP, Warszawa 1977, p. 35.
- ²⁹ W. Goszczyński, R. Śpiewak, The dark side of the bun. Endo and exogenous class exclusions in Polish alternative food network, „Food, Culture & Society” 2022, p. 1–27, doi: 10.1080/15528014.2022.2096367.
- ³⁰ C. Grasseni, Seeds of trust...
- ³¹ <https://www.ifoam.bio/our-work/how/standards-certification/participatory-guarantee-systems>
- ³² <https://www.supermercadoscooperativos.com/somos>.
- ³³ Networks: <https://reas.red/eu>.
- ³⁴ <https://reas.red/eu/carta-de-economia-solidaria/>.
- ³⁵ https://www.consumoresponde.es/art%C3%ADculos/las_cooperativas_de_consumo.
- ³⁶ <https://economysolidale.net/>.
- ³⁷ <https://rete-ries.it/>.
- ³⁸ <https://www.asociaceampi.cz/>.

3

Cooperatives and the law





Legal solutions for Polish cooperatives

Case study of the Warsaw Food Cooperative „Dobrze“

As in other countries (see Table 3), the Polish law does not explicitly regulate the operation of food cooperatives. They may operate in various legal forms and also as informal groups. Assuming that cooperatives should be based on collective action and managed democratically, they may function in particular in the legal forms of association, ordinary association, cooperative, social cooperative and non-profit company.

The choice of a particular legal form of the cooperative and the way in which it conducts its activities will in turn determine which legal regulations (not only civil law, but also administrative or tax law) will apply to it. For example, some of the forms mentioned above are non-governmental organisations (NGOs), so they can carry out their sales activities in the form of paid public benefit activities (ODPP) and benefit from certain rights available to NGOs. On the other hand, giving a food cooperative the form of a cooperative requires it to run



ist activity in a form of the business activity and prevents it from exercising the rights of an NGO, but at the same time allows it to make a profit and freely dispose of it.

This chapter (1) describes the case of the Warsaw-based food cooperative, Kooperatywa Spożywcza „Dobrze”, which since 2021 has been in the process of legal transformation. It then presents (2) the conclusions formulated on the basis of the analysed case regarding the choice of legal form for food cooperatives under the current legal regime and (3) recommendations for legislative changes aiming to create a more favourable legal environment for cooperatives.

FOOD COOPERATIVE „DOBZE“

Description of activities

One of the food cooperatives operating in Poland is the Warsaw-based Food Cooperative „Dobrze”. Dobrze runs cooperative shops that sell primarily healthy, seasonal, environmentally friendly food produced with respect for workers’ rights. In addition, the shops offer other products, including cosmetics and household chemicals.

The cooperative shops are open to all customers but members of the cooperative can buy from them at lower prices. In return for the discounts, members of the cooperative are obliged to perform membership duties for the organisation, e.g. helping out in the cooperative shops or transporting goods to the shops. Currently, the cooperative has about 400 members in total. At the same time, the cooperative employs a permanent team of employees (about 15 people), who are responsible for the running of the shops and the functioning of the organisation.

In addition to its sales activities, the cooperative regularly organises community-focused events and conducts educational and advocacy activities on social entrepreneurship, ecology and healthy eating.

Development

The “Dobrze” Food Cooperative was founded in 2013 as an informal group and was registered as an association in 2014. Initially, its activities consisted in directly ordering food products from suppliers to meet the needs of the cooperative’s members and relied solely on the work of its members.

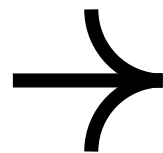
The cooperative’s operating model has been gradually developing. In addition to orders made to meet the needs of members, first one and then another cooperative shop was opened – non-members can also shop there. The development of the business also required the hiring of a team of employees, working in the shops and the organisation’s office on a permanent basis.



As the cooperative grew, the way in which the organisation was managed also evolved. Initially, the smaller number of members and the limited scale of activities allowed more direct management of the organisation by the members themselves. As the membership and scale of the organisation increased, its governance changed to a model based on the association's permanent bodies, i.e. the Board of Directors, the Audit Committee and the General Assembly. At the same time, mechanisms were introduced to secure participatory management of the organisation, e.g. the obligation to organise regular board meetings open to members, decision-making by the general meeting by consensus or the option to set up working groups in which members who do not hold a position in the cooperative's governing bodies can participate.

Transformation

The COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent reduction in the number of people buying from cooperative shops has disrupted the financial stability of the cooperative. It also became apparent that continuing to operate as an association made it significantly more difficult to rebuild financial stability and expand the organisation. By



The form of cooperative (spółdzielni)

enables

to conduct profitable

economic activity

on a large scale.

operating sales activities in the form of the ODPP, the association was not able to save the generated profits in order to hedge against further crises. Moreover, the association could not carry out its sales activities in the form of a business activity, as selling products was the core activity of the cooperative. Whereas, according to the provisions of

the Law on Associations, the economic activity of an association should be subsidiary to its social activity. What was more, operating in the form of an association prevented the cooperative from attracting external investors.



At the same time, the business model of the cooperative required change. The main problems in this respect were: transporting goods directly from producers to the shops, which hindered the efficient running of the shops; the insufficient number of shops, which did not allow to finance the operation of the organisation's office; and the two-tier structure for the management of the employees' team, where all employees reported directly to the Board of Directors.

Accordingly, in June 2021, the transformation process of the cooperative began. First of all, this process involves a business transformation. There are plans to open a cooperative warehouse and further shops the income from which will fully cover the organisation's administration costs, as well as to modify the staff structure.

Secondly, the transformation entails a change in the legal form of the cooperative. An analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of the legal forms under which food cooperatives can operate has shown that the most advantageous at the current stage of the cooperative's development is the form of *spółdzielnia* – a cooperative. The change of the legal form therefore meant that the Association and its members founded the Dobrze Cooperative,

in which the majority of shares belong to the Association. In order to contribute the declared shares, the Association is transferring the enterprise used for the sales activities (i.e. all of its assets used for the operation of the two cooperative shops) to the Cooperative. As a result of this transaction, the entire sales activity of the Kooperatywa „Dobrze” are taken over by the Dobrze Cooperative [Spółdzielnia] and will be conducted as its business activity. The Association, on the other hand, will continue to carry out social, educational and advocacy activities while remaining a major shareholder in the Cooperative.

The transformation process of the Cooperative is currently underway. From June 2021 to June 2022, the members of the Association worked out the detailed rules of the Cooperative and drafted its Articles. In September 2022, the election of the first governing bodies of the Cooperative was held and in December 2022 the Cooperative was registered in the National Court Register. The Cooperative is taking over the sales operations in March 2023.

Selection of legal form

There were several reasons for choosing the legal form of a cooperative [*spółdzielnia*]. To begin with, just like an association, the legal form of a cooperative enables the organisation to work in support of certain social values and ensures democratic governance of the organisation – in cooperatives the principle of equality of votes is applied, whereby, regardless of the number of shares held, one member is entitled to one vote at the general assembly. Unlike an association, however, the form of a cooperative makes it possible to carry out profitable economic activities on a large scale, which is crucial to ensure the financial stability of the organisation.

Secondly, operating in the form of a cooperative makes it possible to attract investors who can purchase shares and thus finance its development. At the same time, thanks to the principle of equality of votes, this form protects the organisation from being taken over by investors (consumer members make up the majority of members, so they hold the majority of votes at the general meeting).



An additional long-term benefit of choosing the form of a cooperative was that it allowed a network of smaller cooperatives to be built within the Cooperative Dobrze network. As the established Cooperative allows legal entities to join, other food cooperatives can also become members. As part of the social franchising project currently under development, they will be able to run their own cooperative shops based on the business model developed by the Dobrze Cooperative, as well as use the warehouse owned by the Cooperative and shared administrative services. In addition, as members of the Cooperative, they will participate in its profits and have a voice at the general assembly. At the same time, they will be autonomous in the running of their cooperative shops.

The challenges of transformation

In the course of selecting a legal form and transforming the Cooperative, several challenges arose with regard to the regulations governing its activities under different legal formats.

To start with, the form of both an association and a cooperative have important limitations and are not fully adapted to the operation of food cooperatives selling goods to non-members. As stated above, an association cannot make sales that generate a profit and at the same time constitute its core activity. A cooperative, on the other hand - despite the pro-social and democratic nature of the organisation - cannot exercise most of the rights enjoyed by NGOs. In particular, it cannot receive subsidies from public funds granted to NGOs or use the premises and other local government services provided for NGOs.

These restrictions also apply to obtaining funding under the provisions of the Act on Social and Solidarity Economy. The rights provided for social economy entities (PES) can only be exercised by the categories of entities specified in this Act, including NGOs, social cooperatives and certain specific types of cooperatives - workers, the disabled, the blind cooperatives and agricultural production cooperatives. However, the definition of PES does not include 'ordinary' cooperatives, i.e. the form in which a consumer cooperative may be run.

Besides, unlike an association, a cooperative has to pay the full fees for registration or amendment proceedings at the National Court Register (KRS). Despite the pro-social nature of their activities, cooperatives operating in the form of a cooperative therefore have to incur significant costs when registering with the KRS and pay fees each time the details in the register need to be amended.

Additional challenges are related to the regulations contained in the Cooperative Law. The provisions of the Law are very detailed and leave little discretion in determining the internal structure of the organisation (unlike the provisions of the Law on Associations, which leave a great deal of discretion in determining the structure of the association). For example, the inflexibility of the provisions of the Cooperative Law may be problematic for cooperatives operating in a non-hierarchical manner and making decisions collegially, as the provisions require the cooperative to have a president of the board and the chair of the supervisory body.



The last challenge was connected with the planning of the transformation process itself - Polish law does not allow for the possibility of transforming an association into a cooperative. Since the assets of the association should be used for societal purposes, there is no possibility to transfer these assets to a cooperative (including the dissolution of the association and the transfer of the remaining assets). Therefore, it is necessary to apply a structure in which the enterprise operated by the association is transferred to the cooperative as a share contribution.

CONCLUSIONS. CHOICE OF LEGAL FORM OF THE ACTIVITY UNDER THE CURRENT LEGAL REGIME

At present, none of the legal forms in which food cooperatives can operate is fully adapted to their specific characteristics. At the same time, these forms are quite diverse and the choice of a particular form entails different legal consequences.

LEGAL FORM	DISADVANTAGES	ADVANTAGES
Ordinary association	1. Lack of possibility to conduct business activity. 2. Lack of possibility to run ODPP [Paid public benefit activity]. (So it can only order products for its members, but cannot sell them externally).	1. Enjoys the rights of an NGO. 2. The simplest and no-fee mode of registration for organisations.
Association	1. Lack of possibility to conduct business activity as the core activity. 2. Lack of possibility to make a profit from ODPP.	1. Benefits from the rights enjoyed by NGOs and PES. 2. Proceedings in the National Court Register exempt from fees. 3. Freedom to shape the internal structure.
Cooperative	1. Does not enjoy the rights of an NGO or PES. 2. Little freedom to determine the internal structure. 3. Proceedings at the National Court Register are not exempt from fees.	1. Freedom to make and dispose of profit (including the ability to pay dividends to members). 2. Possibility to attract external investors.
Social cooperative	1. Strict requirements on who can join the organisation. 2. Lack of freedom to dispose of profits.	1. Benefits from some of the rights enjoyed by NGOs and PES. 2. Proceedings at the National Court Register exempt from fees.
Non-profit company	1. Does not guarantee the democratic nature of the organisation (no statutory principle of equality of votes). 2. Lack of freedom to dispose of profits. 3. Proceedings at the National Court Register are not exempt from fees.	Benefits from some of the rights enjoyed by NGOs and PES.

Table 3. Key advantages and disadvantages of the five forms in which cooperatives can operate



	Czechia	Poland	Hungary	Italy
GENERAL LEGAL FRAMEWORK				
Description of legal provisions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Food cooperatives are not directly regulated by law. They can operate both as cooperatives and as associations. Generally, cooperatives are established in the form of an association, as this is a simpler form of activity. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Food cooperatives are not directly regulated by law. They can operate in a variety of legal forms. Generally, cooperatives are established as non-governmental organisations, as this enables them to enjoy additional rights. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Food cooperatives are not directly regulated by law. They can operate in a variety of legal forms. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> There are 2 models of food cooperatives in the country – large cooperatives, operating in the legal form of a cooperative, and a large network of smaller organisations. The legal regulation of cooperatives does not correspond to the specificity of small cooperatives, so they operate either as informal groups or as non-profit associations.
Main advantages	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Freedom to choose the legal form of the cooperative. The possibility to run the cooperative as an association, which is easier for economic operators. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Freedom to choose the legal form of the cooperative. Possibility to adapt the legal form to the stage and scale of the cooperative. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Freedom to choose the form of the cooperative. Possibility for farmers to benefit from tax simplification and exemptions. 	Ample opportunity to benefit from public funds granted to cooperatives that operate as non-profit associations.
Main challenges	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of freedom to dispose of the profit generated by the association. The form of an association does not guarantee the democratic character of the organisation (among other things, it allows the existence of different types of members and does not require the general meeting to be the highest authority of the association). 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of a legal form that fully corresponds to the specificity of food cooperatives – each form has significant limitations. Cooperatives that operate in the legal form of a cooperative are not granted the rights enjoyed by other civil society organisations. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> The activities of social cooperatives lie on the borderline of the “grey area” – they operate as non-governmental organisations, but it is debatable whether their activities do not generate profit. Excessive regulation and its complexity results in legal uncertainty. 	Smaller cooperatives operating in the form of an association are less egalitarian in nature and therefore find it more difficult to operate on the same scale as large cooperatives operating in the legal form of a cooperative.
DETAILED LEGAL REGULATIONS				
Direct regulation of cooperatives	No	No	No	No
Legal forms in which cooperatives can operate	A cooperative An association	A cooperative An association An ordinary association A social cooperative A non-profit company	A cooperative An association A commercial law company	A non-profit association
Food distribution	Distribution conducted on the same terms as for other entrepreneurs.	Distribution conducted on the same terms as for other entrepreneurs.	Distribution conducted on the same terms as for other entrepreneurs.	No data
Social economy	Cooperatives are social enterprises insofar as they operate to provide work and social integration for people from groups at risk of social exclusion.	Cooperatives are social economy entities insofar as they operate under certain legal forms. However, some of these forms may be granted social enterprise status if they also fulfil additional conditions.	No legal regulations pertaining to social economy.	Cooperatives are not social enterprises because their business revenues do not reach the legally required threshold (70% of revenues).

Table 4. Legal arrangements for cooperatives in the 3 countries under analysis and in Poland

SOURCE: Compiled by Samuel Boscarello, Jiří Kohoutek, Agnes Major, Jan Slaviček.



An analysis of the different legal forms under which food cooperatives can operate suggests that the choice of legal form should depend primarily on the cooperative's stage of development and scale of activity. If the cooperative is just beginning its activities or may have problems with self-financing, it is better to choose one of the forms ensuring the possibility of exercising the rights enjoyed by NGOs and PES. If, on the other hand, the cooperative has the potential to self-finance its activities, a cooperative is a better form, enabling it to conduct its business activities freely and to generate a profit and attract external investors.

With a significant level of development of a cooperative, it is also worth considering its functioning in the form of a 'social group', composed of several related legal entities (following the example of capital groups formed in the private sector). For example, if a cooperative wants to both conduct sales as a business and implement publicly funded social projects, it can operate in parallel as a cooperative and an association. In this case, the association carrying out social projects can be a shareholder of the cooperative conducting economic activity and the cooperative can be a supporting member of the association. Thus, such a cooperative acts as a group of several related legal entities, carrying

out different types of activities but bringing together the same people and pursuing the same social objective. These entities may also then operate under similar business names (e.g. differing only in the designation of their legal form).

Furthermore, cooperatives operating in different legal forms can network by setting up joint cooperatives or by joining each other's organisations. Such a solution may have legal advantages (e.g. cooperatives co-forming a network may operate as NGOs and benefit from their rights, while the network itself may operate as a cooperative and generate income which may then be shared among member cooperatives). At the same time, networking in this form can strengthen the capacity and increase the competitiveness of the cooperatives working together.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LEGISLATIVE CHANGE

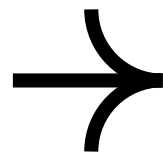
As indicated above, none of the currently existing legal forms is fully adapted to the nature of food cooperatives' activities. **However, the specific character of the operation of cooperatives is most similar to the form of a cooperative - operating for economic purposes, but based on the principles of solidarity and democratic management.** At the same time, the advantages associated with the operation of cooperatives in the form of an association, a social cooperative or a non-profit company mainly amount to the possibility of benefiting from certain administrative and tax rights.

It would therefore appear to be the right direction to establish food cooperatives in the form of a cooperative and, at the same time, to introduce changes in the law aimed at facilitating their activities under this form. The rights granted to cooperatives could be similar to those enjoyed by entities operating in the other forms analysed.



Therefore, the following is recommended:

- 1) **to extend to cooperatives the same rights as those enjoyed by NGOs**, including allowing them to benefit from public funds and other forms of support from the public administration and extending to them certain administrative and tax exemptions;
- 2) **to include cooperatives in the definition of PES** by adding the form of a cooperative to the catalogue of entities recognised as PES or by abandoning the catalogue of forms in which PES may operate, currently contained in the Act, and phrasing the definition of PES in a different manner;
- 3) **to increase the flexibility of the regulation contained in the Cooperative Law** along the lines of the provisions of the Law on Associations, which leave more freedom for its members to define the internal structure of the organisation;
- 4) **to exempt proceedings on the registration and amendment of the registration of cooperatives in the National Court Register from fees** following the exemption enjoyed by associations and social cooperatives.



The choice of legal form should depend on the degree of development and the scale of activity of the cooperative.

At the same time, starting activities in the form of a cooperative may be associated with restrictions related to the need to register with the National Court Register and the relatively high minimum number of members (10 natural persons, while for an association it is 7 persons and for an ordinary association 3 persons). In this regard, two additional recommendations may be considered to facilitate the start-up of cooperatives operating in the form of a cooperative:

- 5) **to create a new, simplified type of a cooperative**, intended primarily for cooperatives at an early stage of development or

operating on a small scale, modelled on the form of an ordinary association, i.e., for example, requiring the participation of fewer people, subject to entry in the municipal register instead of registration in the National Court Register, and subject to certain limitations compared to a 'registered cooperative';

- 6) **to allow the conversion of an 'ordinary cooperative' into a 'registered cooperative'** modelled on the current procedure for converting ordinary associations into associations.



CONCLUSIONS

The research described above, shows that food cooperativism in the European countries under analysis has developed in line with local contexts, needs and cooperative traditions. Italy and Spain have a long tradition of establishing food cooperatives and umbrella organisations that would aim to accelerate the development of the sector. Already at the beginning of the 20th century, Italian cooperatives were seen as exemplary in many respects compared to the rest of Europe, while in the early 2000s Spanish cooperatives covering various areas of life became famous, springing up like mushrooms after the 2008 crisis. The Czech and Hungarian examples, on the other hand, show how difficult it is in the Central and Eastern European countries to develop sustainable cooperation, as cooperatives are still seen through the prism of the socialist experience. The lower level of social trust and the still lower income of the region's inhabitants are not conducive to the creation of a modern food cooperative movement.

Cooperatives develop there by synergy – the thickening network of cooperatives in a given region forces, as it were, the formation of umbrella structures, which in turn foster the formation of further cooperatives and expand the influence of the network as such. The greater the number of cooperative members, the more power and resources that can be used to develop the meta-structure. There are regional umbrella organisations, and cooperatives from different regions that share certain similar characteristics, operate in similar sectors or specialisations also form networks. In Italy, there are even second-tier organisations that bring together members of umbrella organisations.

Their role is significant, as it is only through integration and cooperation between individual cooperatives that their activities can be sustainably supported. This allows them to become actors in public policies, including local policies (rather than being merely the subjects of top-down regulations). These organisations have various functions – they provide access to a variety of services, e.g. assistance in the development and use of software useful for cooperatives, they collect information on legislative changes, they look for new formal solutions, create organisation and accounting models, and finally they prepare food quality systems.

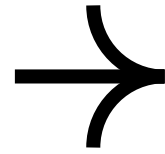
Individual entities – even relatively large ones, as in Spain – can hardly secure access to these resources. The integration function, the sharing of experience, is also important – many of the activities undertaken by cooperatives are aimed at creating innovations, e.g. in the form of ready-to-use action patterns, applicable organisational models. Umbrella institutions in both countries also engage in political advocacy so as to promote an alternative to the prevailing economic model. The Italian one is additionally active in promoting the idea of energy cooperatives

The lack of trust in public institutions in Poland and in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, makes it difficult to legalise and formalise such bodies. The Spanish example shows that they are nevertheless necessary for the development of the movement as a whole. In Italy, however, the situation is exactly the opposite, with most GAS being informal, small entities, operating in a local context. Nonetheless, thanks to a high level of social capital, i.e., inter alia, a high level of social trust and commitment to consume good quality food, the development of GAS is very dynamic – especially in the northern part of Italy. In Poland, as in the other countries of the region surveyed, the situation is much more difficult. In both Czechia and Hungary,



the low level of social capital and trust in public institutions makes building such alternative food networks an arduous work of many years. Food cooperatives represent a „niche within a niche“, i.e. a tiny splinter of the world of social activism, hooked on the one hand to the so-called third sector, and on the other balancing on the border of do-it-yourself initiatives, completely bottom-up, alternative to reality, often almost escapist, and consequently aimed mostly at the financially and culturally endowed middle class from large cities.

The lack of understanding of the specificity of the food cooperative sector by public institutions, especially those involved in food marketing, is also a problem in Central and Eastern European countries. The only way to change this is to create an advocacy institution to explain what the sector needs, to facilitate conversations between representatives of the sector and public institutions officials.



The lack of trust

in public institutions in Poland and in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, makes

In Spain, Czechia and, to some extent, Hungary, the most popular operating model is the establishment of cooperative shops. In Spain, cooperatives, created on the basis of a well-designed business model supported by the labour of members, operate efficiently and profitably. The Czech example is not so optimistic; the profitability of the shop is low and its operation is supported by funds from

a European project. The cooperative is thus, to some extent, an artificial construct sustained by an influx of external funds. It seems that in Central European countries, where people have fewer resources, an important aspect of the cooperative's sales activity is to reduce the price of good quality food.



A very important factor limiting the development of cooperatives is the fact that, as grassroots and mainly member-based entities, they have to compete with large food corporations paying the same taxes, renting space at the same prices, etc. It therefore seems that a crucial development factor would be if local authorities made premises with private parking available on preferential terms and thus treated cooperatives as useful organisations for the development of the local market and the society. This proposal fits in with the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact¹, which aims to create strong and resilient urban food systems. Low-cost premises would allow the establishment of shops that could compete on prices with large area stores or popular discount supermarkets, at the same time offering high-quality food, organically grown, from farmers operating in a local context and within the logic of a 'short supply chain'.

The Italian example – numerous, small, informal and operating on the solidarity principle purchasing groups – although impressive, seems less likely to be implemented in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe, given the lower willingness of farmers as well as consumers to cooperate and the lower interest in quality food.

The first step towards strengthening the food co-operative sector should therefore be the establishment, following the Italian or Spanish model, of an umbrella organisation. It would provide technical and organisational support to existing cooperatives, but would also be a 'seedbed' for the idea of cooperatives. It would be worthwhile to reach out to smaller towns and smaller farmers with this idea. An opportunity for the development of this sector, including an umbrella organisation, is provided by the measures and funds that will now flow from the EU, in connection with the „From Farm to Fork“ Strategy. It aims to shorten the supply chain, reduce the number of intermediaries and strengthen local food systems.

¹ <https://www.milanurbanfoodpolicypact.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Report-MPA2019-light.pdf>



Final remarks

The first presentation of the results of the research, which formed the basis for writing this report, took place during the meeting „Food cooperatives – what we can learn from each other” on 19 November 2022 in Warsaw. During the meeting, the assembled members of cooperatives from all over Poland discussed the need for a common model for Polish cooperatives, the possibilities of creating a network of cooperatives, and the sector’s plans for the future. Researchers from the team compiling this summary – Ruta Śpiewak, Bartłomiej Błesznowski, Adela Gąsiorowska

– supported by Elżbieta Dopierała from Poznań Food Cooperative and Katarzyna Kowalówka from Kooperatywa Wawelska created a space for discussion, in which the history of cooperativism was confronted with contemporary challenges facing the movement, and the results of surveys in four European Union countries served as a basis for discussing the condition of cooperativism in Poland and developing recommendations for its further development. The meeting consisted of a presentation of the historical part and the results of research in Czechia, Italy, Hungary and Spain. By

showing different organisational contexts, it presented possible scenarios and solutions for the future of Polish cooperatives. The preceding contributions were complemented by a presentation on legal recommendations for cooperative organisations in Poland based on the experience of the organisational transformation recently undergone by Kooperatywa „Dobrze”, which changed its legal form from an association to a cooperative. During the workshop sessions, which were led by invited experts - Nina Józefina Bak from Kooperatywa „Dobrze” and Rafał Krenz from CoopTechHub - the activists present were able to reflect together on what they considered to be the most important issues in terms of the future of cooperatives in Poland, what instruments were needed to bring about the development of this sector in Poland, and what further steps they perceived as necessary to initiate this process. A number of recommendations were developed, the most important of which are presented below, as we consider them to be an important contribution of the cooperativist community to this report. When asked about the tasks they would like to set for the emerging umbrella structure aimed at supporting the activity and development of the Polish food cooperative sector, the participants listed the following:

- to lay the foundations and set up the structure of the Secretariat of the Food Cooperatives Network, the purpose of which would be to take care of the proper flow of information, build the institutional community of cooperatives, create procedures;
- to use the Network as a forum for sharing knowledge and experience between cooperatives, to create a special communication space that will enable individual organisations to learn from each other;
- to engage in advocacy activities - trying to influence the external context by creating successful socio-economic conditions, influencing public policies, lobbying;
- to facilitate the exchange of e-tools and to create a common IT platform that could at the same time improve the performance of cooperatives at the level of their day-to-day economic activity, linking them into a coherent economic structure in which they could support each other through the exchange of goods, services, etc.;
- to educate with a view to raising cooperative and environmental awareness, with the aim of building the group awareness of cooperatives;
- to create a common business model based on good practices and to establish a common wholesaler that could supply multiple cooperatives, thus lowering sales costs;
- to introduce common criteria for suppliers - creating a cooperative „quality certificate”;
- to integrate the cooperative community through various recreational and social initiatives and events;
- to develop systems to reward commitment;
- to establish a common guarantee fund that would assist cooperatives in difficult economic situations.



The cooperative movement is developing dynamically in the EU, with a multitude of formal and informal institutions that form it. The authors do not aspire to present a complete picture of cooperativism in the analysed countries, but only to outline its most important elements. The report, presented above, is intended to help Polish cooperatives develop in such a way that they can improve the food system. The authors hope that the collected experiences will become an inspiration for activists involved in food sovereignty movements. The organisational and technological solutions, the forms of engagement with the surrounding environment outlined above, can be used in ongoing activities, and can serve to build, as it turns out, a much-needed umbrella organisation. Last but not least, they can be applied in advocacy activities.



Annex

Unstructured interview questionnaire

1. HISTORY

- How long has your cooperative been operating?
- How did it start?
- Have there been any turning points in the course of its operation (e.g. legalisation, division, change of the legal form, conflict)?
- How many members do you currently have?
- Are you actively working to increase the number of members?
- Is there an opportunity for people from different types of minorities (e.g. refugees, impoverished people) to be involved in the cooperative's activities?
- What are the basic social characteristics of the members (including suppliers)?

- What was the primary motivation for you to get involved in the cooperative? Has the motivation to get involved changed over time?
- What do you think are the motives of most of your members? Do you study them? How do you collect the information?

2. DAY-TO-DAY OPERATIONS, FINANCES

- What are the day-to-day operations of the cooperative?
- Who organises the procurement?

- Do you have a common fund? How is it calculated, who manages it? How has it changed over time?
- Do you have your own premises? Are you satisfied with it? Why yes and why not?
- How often do you meet? Does it change seasonally?
- How do you make decisions?
- How do you communicate with each other, with suppliers? (consider also technological issues).
- Are specific individuals regularly responsible for specific activities?
- Does anyone get paid for their work?
- Do you operate on the basis of internal regulations, how have they been adopted??

3. RELATIONS WITH SUPPLIERS

- How do you establish contacts with suppliers?
- What criteria do you use to find suppliers?
- Do you have any written rules for this cooperation?
- Is there any support you offer your suppliers?

4. CONTACTS WITH OTHER INSTITUTIONS

- Do you receive support (financial, in-kind) from public or private institutions? What kind of support is it? Which institutions are these?
- How has this changed over time?
- Do you participate in grant programmes? If so, please describe what this looks like.
- What does your presence in your local community look like? What does the local community of the cooperative mean to you (what types of localness)?

5. DEVELOPMENT AND EDUCATION ACTIVITIES

- When the cooperative movement emerged at the turn of the 20th century, one of the aspects of the cooperatives' existence involved educational activities for both members and non-members. Does your cooperative undertake these types of activities? What are they?

6. PLANS FOR THE FUTURE

- How do you see your cooperative developing: the next year and over the next 5 years.

7. COOPERATION BETWEEN COOPERATIVES AT LOCAL, INTERNATIONAL LEVEL

- Do you think we should take action to integrate food cooperatives at a European, global level, following the model of URGENCI for Community Supported Agriculture?
- Do co-operatives in your country, region cooperate? What does this cooperation look like?



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Partners

The Grochowska Kooperatywa Foundation

was established in 2014. Its main goal is to support Kooperatywa Grochowska, the first Polish food cooperative, which has been operating since 2009.

One of the main goals of the Foundation is to educate and support health care through the promotion of healthy lifestyles, as well as to educate on consumer awareness and the consumer's right to natural and healthy products. The second major goal of the Foundation is to support the development of local communities and societies, in particular the activation of women and mothers.

www.kooperatywagrochowska.pl

The Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung foundation

is a non-profit political foundation affiliated with the German Green Party. The Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung in Warsaw leads projects related to International and European Politics with a special focus on Eastern policy, Energy & Climate, European Agricultural Policy, Democracy & Human Rights, and Baltic Dialogue.

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We are one of nine innovation communities established by the European Institute of Innovation and Technology (EIT), an independent EU body set up in 2008 to drive innovation and entrepreneurship across Europe.

Find out more at www.eitfood.eu or follow us via social media: Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, YouTube and Instagram.

Ruta Śpiewak, Bartłomiej Błesznowski oraz Adela Gąsiorowska (VII)

Kooperatywy spożywcze w UE. Lekcje dla Polski

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