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The Cooperative Sector in the Nordic Countries: The Finnish Example

El sector cooperativo en los países nórdicos: el ejemplo finlandés

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Abstract: While the cooperative idea can be seen as universal, the concrete features are still highly characterised by national traditions and the general socio-political settings. Reflecting this, the contribution investigates the situation in Finland. These observations are closely interwoven with theoretical reflections around the question if cooperatives and the cooperative sector can be considered as germs or an alternative socio-economic development, overcoming the profit-obsessed, unsustainable capitalist system.

Keywords: cooperatives, political economy, nordic countries, societal organization, economic success, Finland.

Resumen: Si bien la idea cooperativa puede considerarse universal, sus características concretas todavía están muy caracterizadas por las tradiciones nacionales y los entornos sociopolíticos generales. Como reflejo de esto, la contribución investiga la situación en Finlandia. Estas observaciones están estrechamente entrelazadas con reflexiones teóricas en torno a la cuestión de si las cooperativas y el sector cooperativo pueden considerarse como gérmenes o como un desarrollo socioeconómico alternativo, superando el sistema capitalista insostenible y obsesionado con las ganancias.

Palabras clave: cooperativas, economía política, países nórdicos, organización social, éxito económico, Finlandia.

Orientation

In this text, we shall focus on the development and main features of the Finnish version of the Nordic cooperative sector. We shall begin by giving a general description of cooperative activity in Finland. Even though our aim is not to present a comprehensive historically oriented review; rather the aim is to describe some of the most significant dimensions and phases that have led to the current situation and those which can define the future development of the Finnish cooperative sector. This being said, let us first focus on the most significant numbers that describe the nature of the Finnish cooperative sector. After this, we shall consider the Cooperatives as all-encompassing sectoral organisations, and whether the cooperatives are the condition for some future societal development. After these discussions, we shall provide a brief historical sketch of the co-operatives in the Nordic countries, which will allow analysing the general characteristics of the cooperative system in the Nordic countries and —most of all— Finland as a historical example for an innovative movement. Let us first have a look at some empirical data —they will be discussed later in some detail.

Table 1
**Cooperative enterprises, Cooperatives and mutual life insurance
 and damage insurance cooperatives**

Cooperative group	Number of shareholders 31.12.2021	Members (man-year)	Staff 31.12.2021	Turnover million euro	Market share%
SERVICE COOPERATION					
<i>OP-group</i>	118	2 081 341	13 079	4491 (1)	38 (2)
* Change between 2021-20	-15	1,2%	3,8%	6,1%	0,4%
<i>POP bank</i>	23	90 128	822	176,2 (1)	2,1 (2)
* Change between 2021-20	-1	0,3%	4,7%	42,1%	0,0%
<i>LähiTapiola (Local Tapiola insurance and investment cooperative company)</i>	21	1 600 000	3 659	2106,5 (3)	26,5 (4)
* Change between 2021-20	—	0%	2,6%	7,6%	-0,002
<i>Other mutual/cooperative enterprises or companies</i>	4	839 742	1 622	1278,9 (1)	..
* Change between 2021-20	—	1%	-3,0%	20,5%	..
<i>Invest cooperatives</i>	5	249 572	6 767	908	-
* Change 2021-20	—	-3%	15,6%	13,2%	-
CONSUMER COOPERATION					
<i>S-Group in total</i>	20	2 471 637	39 861	12 329	46,1 (5)
* Change 2021-20	—	0,7%	3,3%	6,1%	0,1%
<i>Energy producing cooperatives</i>	8	40 687	141	253,9	..
* Change between 2021-20	—	1,7%	3,7%	32,2%	..
<i>Telecommunications cooperatives</i>	8	47 450	911	167,7	..
* Change between 2021-20	—	0,4%	31,8%	39,6%	..

1. The Cooperatives as all-encompassing sectoral Organisations

It is often suggested that non-governmental organisations —here taken in a very broad understanding— are defined negatively, as implied in the name being “non-organisations”: non-governmental, non-profit and non-market organisations, and often non-political. On the other hand, cooperatives are defined by their multiple positive references: They are both, economic entities in the strict sense, i.e., undertaking profit-oriented production or provision of services; at the same time, however, they are more and different than that and claim to explicitly fulfil non-profit objectives as well. This refers both to the production and provision of services, i.e., the type of products and services and to the way production and provision are organised.

Thus, although they certainly do not have a governmental function, they do have a distinctly political function which includes as well regulatory mechanisms. They unite the functional areas of market, state and society, which are often seen as a triad. Moreover, we can assume that in an ideal-typical view, they embody a special understanding of the economy and society. The concrete form this takes depends very much on the respective study of national developments and conditions. Thus, methodologically, we are faced with a special challenge: in temporal terms, history as a condition for the present must be worked out; at the same time, we must analyse general forms of soci(et)al cooperation and the cooperative sector in connection with the specific national characteristics of the political economy and the societal political politics of governments. This links well into the analysis of Karl Polanyi who emphasises a major shift characterising the establishment of capitalism, namely the orientation on gain as the main determinant of soci(et)al action, and as one that is detached from all other mechanisms of regulation and control. He wrote in his *Magnum Opus*:

“The assertion appears extreme if not shocking in its crass materialism. But the peculiarity of the collapse which we have witnessed was precisely that it rested on economic foundations. Other societies and other civilizations, too, were limited by the material conditions of their existence—this is a common trait of all human life, indeed, of all life, whether religious or non-religious, materialist or spiritualist. All types of societies are limited by economic factors. Nineteenth-century civilization alone was economic in a different and distinctive sense, for it chose to base itself on a motive only rarely acknowledged as valid in the history of human societies, and certainly never before raised to the level of a justification of action and behaviour in everyday

life, namely, gain. The self-regulating market system was uniquely derived from this principle.” (Polanyi 1957, p. 31.)

If we remain for the time being on the general level, this form of organisation of economic activity refers in part to a certain form of resolving the fundamental social conflict between classes.

At the same time, however, Polanyi pointed out that a counter-movement was developing, which he saw in the fact that a subsequent balancing of the many social forces was taking place and that the “hidden facets of social life” and the resulting disadvantages and exclusions were being dealt with retrospectively and, as it were, peripherally—one could say: reintroducing a little sociality through the back door. This is particularly virulent in discussions under the heading of social policy (see, for example, Fraser 2012.)

Frazer, who argues from a feminist perspective, criticises that what remains substantially underexposed is that women have always played a special role in the overall process of economic activity. As important as Fraser’s elaborations are, another aspect must be pointed out. Cooperatives, or the cooperative sector, are by and large as much ignored as the social question, and as part of it: women, are ignored. This may be because cooperatives are both economic enterprises and social enterprises in the sense of socio-political organisations. The characteristic feature is that they do not exist on a borderline, but unite the different areas in an integrated way—at least that is the claim. However, this also means that on the one hand, the cooperative system can be seen as a kind of resistance movement, but at the same time it cannot do without the support of the system itself. As a result, many of the cooperatives play an outsider role, whereby the following focal points can be identified in particular:

- There are cooperations in otherwise strictly excluded areas of production or consumption—as far as the production or provision of services and consumption in the area of protection/defence is concerned, the sector played an essential role by merging the different socio-economic areas at least to some extent; consequently, one can also speak of certain forms of self-help.
- Another important factor is that this form of organisation, as far as it is judged from the perspective of the normal capitalist enterprise, is not competitive. This is countered by the fact that these organisations can survive almost only as start-ups, in small niches, or else through grants from other sources. Last but not least, the sector plays a role by depending on the state promo-

tion (various measures can be mentioned, for instance, tax concessions, provision of certain infrastructural facilities and more—direct subsidies are also used in this context.

- This also characterises a newly emerging space of activity, namely that which is filled by start-ups. Although alternative forms of investment and thus also cooperative approaches can be found in this area, in the end, it remains that no state can be made with this. This formulation, however, points to a fundamental problem of understanding: if one understands economics in the narrow sense of today's mainstream, referring to a form of business management, it can indeed be said that cooperatives are unsuitable as elements of a monetary profit-oriented economy. If, on the other hand, one understands economics as a way of doing business following the definition put forward by Engels—there it is about the production and reproduction of daily life, and thus cannot be reduced to the accumulation of goods as objects of exchange, suggesting that wealth is the accumulation of commodities—things look quite different: In such a perspective, niches, spaces of innovation etc. and the movements taking place within such realms, they present themselves as holistic fields of complex economic activity, which are precisely not cut off from their sociality. It then becomes precisely here to act in terms of the national economy as a process of production and reproduction of social life.

Accordingly, it will be seen that cooperatives are substantially active in areas that are relatively close to consumption. At first glance, it may seem surprising that the financial services sector is also often organised as a cooperative; this can be explained by the fact that activities in this sector are in principle not or less speculative and investment-oriented; instead, they are geared towards helping consumers or even small producers.

2. Cooperatives - Results or conditions for another kind of Society?

Earlier, it had been pointed out that we are dealing with a rather truncated view in traditional analyses. Economic science itself repeatedly tries to transcend the limits it has set for itself, but in doing so it neglects two essential principles: first, economics must be directed essentially towards the fact that it is about the daily life of people in society, being in each case unique. This also means that economic analysis from a political economy perspective must always focus on the distribution of time:

“Assuming communal production, the determination of time naturally remains essential. The less time society needs to produce wheat, cattle, etc., the more time it gains for other production, material or spiritual. As with a single individual, the all-roundness of its development, its enjoyment and its activity depends on saving time. Economy of time, in this all economy finally dissolves.” (Marx 1857/1858, p. 105.)

While mainstream economics refers to managing scarcity—and the distribution of scarce goods, many other factors are equally important. Such wider assessment begins with locating activities concerning the “outer nature” which implies the definition of needs and is not least also a matter of valuing non-gainful activities.

This can be represented with a simple equation:

— Production and reproduction of everyday life are subdivided into the production of

- Means of simple production and reproduction
 - Means of production
 - Means of consumption
 - “Circulatory means”
- Means of production and consumption of extended production/reproduction
 - extended production
 - facilitated production
 - Working conditions
 - Working time
- Costs
 - social - monetary
 - individual - monetary
 - social - non-monetary
 - individual - non-monetary
- of extended reproduction
 - social - monetary
 - individual - monetary
 - social - non-monetary
 - individual - non-monetary

- of the socially necessary goods produced and services rendered
 - social - monetary
 - individual - monetary
 - social - non-monetary
 - individual - non-monetary
 - of the expenses through which time-saving in the area of necessary production and reproduction takes place
 - the saved costs resulting from unproductive or counterproductive activities (such as environmental pollution)
- = Total income of the national economy³

Of course, this is a complex field, requiring in theory and in respect of suitable methods in-depth research on indicators. Works such as those of Frigga Haug on the four-in-one perspective, the approach to Social Quality or also the multiple experiences from the spectrum of activities of cooperatives can be referred to —empirical investigation without losing sight of the qualitative aspects is certainly a major task for the future.

Thus, evaluation is not about monetary values; instead, a different set of indicators is required. More important is, however, that social criteria and valuations of activities are redefined: in addition to quantitative measurement, more or less reduced on allowing an insight at a chronologically fixed point, we need a process analysis, allowing a continuous discussion and further conceptualisation of values. Cooperatives can play an essential role at this point, not least because their role and function are part of the question concerned with the kind of society we are living in.

Emphasising that the production of commodities is only one part of socio-economic activities requires investigating whether the type of society as a framework also determines economic activity, albeit economic activity forms the basis of society. Some conditions can be identified for Nordic societies that favour cooperatives and a cooperative sector as a particular form of soci(et)al organisation – a fact that requires acknowledging that economic activities cannot be limited to the production of more and different goods and provision of services; in fact, it would be more appropriate to speak of the soci(et)al organisation of life and the localisation of the social. Analytically, we are dealing with processual relationalism: on the

³ Self-help”, DIY activities, flea market trade etc. ³ should also be included at appropriate points.

one hand, complex set conditions evoke certain organisational forms of economic activity, on the other hand, the respective organisational forms also shape the entire economic process. These are fundamental aspects and not just details of the use of a general model.

In addition, the low population density played a very important role too: especially the periphery within the periphery, i.e. the rural regions of these countries confronted the population with the need of surviving with spare resources, making use of what is locally/regionally available. —It would be wrong to interpret this as confirmation of the classical economic theory, suggesting that managing scarcity is the central point. Scarcity here meant in the Nordic countries “a natural notion of sustainability”.

Against this background we propose a somewhat unusual classification of cooperatives:

- on the one hand, we find cooperatives that are born out of necessity, protecting the members in an otherwise hostile economic world —this way they are opening up spaces for action (in economic terminology, exploring new ranges for economies of scale);
- on the other hand, cooperatives are emerging from a completely different background, namely the basic idea of optimising inputs, results/output and the relationship between the two. It seems obvious to assume an underlying cost-benefit analysis which is from a very general point of view correct; however, it must be borne in mind that both the input and output criteria are not least in part of a non-material nature.
- Thus, a formula must be sought that forms a modification of Marx’s statement at the beginning of his book entitled *Capital* and allows its application to non-capitalist conditions. Marx wrote in the *Capital*:

“The wealth of those societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails presents itself as “an immense accumulation of commodities,”[...] its unit being a single commodity.” (Marx 1857/1858.)

- If we take this together with Marx’s other statement, namely that all economy is an economy of time, we arrive at the following working hypothesis for further research:
- The prosperity of such societies, which are no longer purely capitalist, is reflected in the time gained for free activity. Taking it from Friedrich Schiller we have seen that

“Man plays only where he is the man in the full meaning of the word man, and he is only fully man where he plays.” (Marx 1857/1858.)

This does not transform cooperatives into a playground; however, it does take away the character of work as a directly purposeful activity in a narrow sense of commodity production and relocates it once again in the overall social order. This means as well that output orientation is not the sole decisive factor —instead, the process of overall production plays a central role. This includes the choice of means, the organisation of work, the combination with other factors such as environmental requirements in the sense of nature conservation or the integration of family demands and services. With this we return to the earlier explanation given with the Polanyian perspective as well as the mentioned extension by Nancy Frazer; extending this, we interpret cooperatives and similar economic activities as an attempt to overcome the amputation of soci(et)al organisation that occurred during the

“nineteenth-century civilization alone [...] as economic in a different and distinctive sense” (Polanyi, 1957.)

Although the existing capitalist system remains untouched, we find for this array and this form of enterprise a redefinition of use value, and at the same time, a redefinition of the relationship between use and exchange value: exchange value is now understood as a comprehensive and meaningful exchange of social and individual (labour) time. —This includes working time in the traditional sense, the quality of work, the possibility of controlling working time and the location of working time, educational time, various dimensions and areas of care activities, and even leisure activities that can be understood in a trivial sense.

This gives cooperatives a lifeworld dimension and puts them in the paradoxical situation of representing both the lifeworld and system world. As far as the cooperative idea is in the foreground, we are dealing with a dominance of use-value-oriented labour.

3. Co-operatives in the Nordic Countries - A brief historical View

The Nordic countries in question have been able to create a unique position for themselves in the globalising world by defending certain characteristics. However, it should not be concealed that this “Nordic model” has come increasingly under pressure.

The guiding hypothesis is that in northern societies cooperatives are essentially characterised by the fact that they correspond to the second type mentioned above, i.e. they aim at the bundling of resources, lowering competitive pressure. Scarcity of resources, a relatively low popula-

tion density, and the peripheral location as well as the resulting relatively limited access to world markets can be roughly described as determining characteristics. While this relative distance to the world market is increasingly undermined, path dependency is slowing this process down.

More fundamental for assessing the role and function of cooperatives is a changed understanding of time. In mainstream economics, everything is geared toward converting performance into monetary values. As shown above, the only criterion is profit and profit is understood as a monetary quantity, calculated as a matter of average time needed to perform certain tasks —on this basis the value of the workforce is also determined: in other words, working time is the core of all measurements within this framework —initially purely seen in quantitative terms: seconds, minutes and hours can be counted. But already here a restriction is necessary, because it is not solely about chronological time but also about the quality, expressed by reference to the societal average.

However, the profitability of cooperatives and the cooperative sector needs other criteria, and other standards. It is not about monetary profit (alone) —neither by individuals nor in business terms nor in terms of society as a whole, i.e. in the narrow sense of the prevailing opinion. Instead, it is about the value of activities in a more general sense, namely that which reflects an integrated way of life. It is about a complex field of this valuation; it includes the production of the material as well as immaterial values and likewise the mode of production; furthermore, it also includes relationality, i.e., the relations between the members of society and the relation to the so-called external nature.

This also means that many of the traditional measures and indicators of success —productivity, the number of people in work, gross domestic product, etc.— say very little and are sometimes even misleading.

4. General Characteristics of the cooperative System in the Nordic Countries⁴

4.1. *Mixed Economies*

It would be foolish to describe any economy today as closed. Nevertheless, there are remarkable differences not only in the degree of openness but also in their structure. Every society is characterised by

⁴ For more detailed description of the Finnish model, see, for example Gubon-Kilke & Laurinkari (2023), Laurinkari (2017), Laurinkari (2021) and Laurinkari (2022).

the specific profile of production and the ownership orientation as it is defined by the political system. The respective mix essentially determines the role of cooperatives in the economic structure in question. The guiding idea, however, is not so much concerned with the various management approaches as they are described in the works on the varieties of capitalism. In the present contribution, another thesis is put up for discussion, starting from a two-dimensional analytical grid, referring to the understanding of all economic activity as being concerned with the production and reproduction of daily life, thus always about the economy of time. These two core views have already been mentioned above. This is shown in the following as an analytical model.

Table 2
Time and property

Societal and social time		Individual-social time
Production for immediate consumption or human reproduction	↔	Production of the means of production required to increase productivity
Time off for non-essential activities	↔	The time that must be spent to ensure production or reproduction

In both cases, it is a matter of social time. This means that in one case the individual is directed towards reproducing himself as a social being, and in the other case it is directed towards reproducing himself in the social. In other words, if we take social and social time, it is a matter of action being directed towards self-realisation in and through the social. Production takes place to unfold and realise itself as the social process within the respective community.

An arguably justifiable simplification suggests that this mode of organisation or production is also in a particular way sustainable. Ideally, then, it is an integrated socioeconomic and socio-political activity in an appropriately designed space, whereby at the same time the power of space and time is not only background but an elementary component of the overall setting.

In conclusion, an analysis of the national level is only of heuristic character, and individual case studies remain just that: individual case studies. Nevertheless, one must try to understand the respective picture from the overall socio-ecological constellation.

4.2. *Economic Success - The Approach of a different Evaluation*

Generally, economic success is measured with a few simple indicators. This is characterised by a distinction between economy and society, in other words, economic performance is aligned abstractly with certain ratios. When we propose in the present contribution to speak of cooperatives in a cooperative society, this simultaneously raises the question of measurement in a new way. Finally, it means that the micro- and macro-levels are brought together in a new way.

In Table 2 we showed how different dimensions are interlinked. This is specifically important within various discourses on use-value versus exchange-value, work and life, custom work versus mass production, locally-integrated production versus production for the global market, etc. Here, we propose another possible interpretation, emerging from a changed perspective: instead of measuring output we direct our attention to the input of the activities understood as a gain of society and the social individuals. Activities, however, are not only about producing goods; more important are factors determining the work process itself and the socio-environmental embedding. Allegedly African wisdom says: if you want to go fast, go alone, but if you want to go far, go together. With this expression, we have an image that enables us to understand the juxtapositions mentioned earlier in a different way, namely as supplements.⁵

It should be consciously refrained from looking for ways to include this in the general productivity model —certainly, arguments can be found that, for example, a work-life balance leads to enhanced productivity; nevertheless, this should be seen as a value in and for itself, and not be put in the service of another moment of social existence. Contradicting the segmentary view, we suggest working towards an integrated approach.

5. **Finland - A historic example for innovation?**

Finland has been for decades one of the world's leading countries in terms of membership in cooperatives.⁶ Its significance for the devel-

⁵ One mistake that is often made is given by using the term “work” as quasi all-encompassing. However, as long as work is primarily associated with gainful employment or negative activity, this quickly leads astray.

⁶ See for more details: Cooperatives Europe key figures (2015); Facts and Figures: Mutual and cooperative insurance in Europe: Measuring the Size and Scope of the Cooperative Economy: Results of the (2014); and Measuring the impact of the cooperative sector (2019).

opment of cooperatives is extremely significant. Nowadays, as many as 86 % of Finns are members of at least one cooperative. The SOK group (multi-functional producer of several fields of consumer services, i.e., production and delivering daily products, insurance, restaurant and hotel services etc.) is dominant among all the cooperative groups in terms of memberships and sales. As many as 35% of Finns are members of the SOK group. The second largest group is the OP Group, a group of local cooperative banks —approximately 25% of the total population are members of this group. The minor operations in the fields of cooperative activity are Lähivakuutus (locally based insurance cooperatives) with 7% of the adult population as members and Metsäliitto (locally based forest owners cooperatives) with four per cent part form the total population.

Currently, the entrepreneurial future of Finnish cooperative enterprises seems positive. Members appreciate in particular discounts on purchases, low-priced products, the continuous development of the company, modernity and good service —as well as the bonus payments. The prospects of the cooperative enterprises are also unanimously assessed as positive.

Among the new cooperative forms, community food cooperatives, selling products of local rural suppliers without intermediaries, the use of household services offered by production cooperatives and community work for the development of residential areas or villages attracted the greatest interest among the population.

Cooperatives can be a possibility to develop the local economy, as they are geared to address directly local needs. They emerge particularly in times of poor economic conditions and/or strong competition. In the course of a few years, almost 800 new cooperatives were founded. The cooperative has proven to be an appropriate and modern form of enterprise for an increasingly interconnected society. At the local level, it translates into providing an excellent tool for self-determined job creation. Socioeconomic problems in both rural and urban areas could be addressed with a strengthened cooperative movement.

Looking at the supply side, cooperatives are in Finland especially meaningful as the bridge, overcoming the tension between the low density of the population in many regions and the need to secure a sufficient supply of goods, doing so by way of offering affordable goods. Thus, cooperatives provided an opportunity to address the problems emerging from insufficient economies of scale.

In this sense, the political dimension it is not about uniting against powerful providers; instead, the goal is to join forces in the sense of pooling resources. Cooperatives that had been founded during the last

few years must be seen in this light —a provision of solidarity communities. Thus, cooperatives and the cooperative movement became topical again.

The “silent revolution” surely played as well a role, though it is difficult to assess the role of changed values. The genuine, ethically superior cooperative values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality and solidarity, which are based on everyday needs, have experienced a resurgence; cooperative members believe in basic ethical values such as honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others. However, such a statement is in this generality problematic, because there can never be any question of ethics per se. Instead, we are talking about ethics that reflect the concrete conditions of social relations. Broadly, four such ethics can be distinguished: i) the standard ethic that corresponds to the respective state of capitalism; ii) next to it are two other types, each of which develops further within the capitalist system, but sees it as “ethically purer” on the one hand in retrospect and iii) on the other in foresight, but precisely without questioning the system boundaries. This is about starting from a pure model, but seeing deviations in reality – from here it is then a matter of (re)realising the forms of the pure in reality; iv) the fourth ethic can be seen in principle doubts raised against the boundaries of the system, feeding into demands to overcome it.

Mass unemployment, upheaval in economic structures, especially in agriculture and in rural areas in general, regional and local development problems, as well as cutbacks in services financed by the municipalities are other generally comprehensible explanations for the popularity of cooperatives. Active work to disseminate information about cooperatives and an increase in advisory services certainly also contributed to the success, as the need for information at the local level.

In short, cooperatives are particularly well suited to address local challenges and achieve sufficient economies of scale despite their small size. In this way, they hardly compete with multinational corporations or large enterprises, because on the one hand, the latter is not in a position to decentralise or localise responses; on the other hand, cooperatives can bridge between local needs and knowledge and the national or even world market. Admittedly, we must see that further technological development —especially connected with the concept of digitalisation and artificial intelligence— will also enable large enterprises to act flexibly and on a small scale.

While these are general, secular trends, they are, however, particularly meaningful for a country like Finland, where the population structure has a considerable influence, which can be defined as a spe-

cific structure in space: we find high qualification and great independent capacity to act on the one hand; on the other hand, through globalisation, we find not only a penetration of global market actors into the periphery but equally a movement of forces from the periphery towards the centre, by way of defying (partly) the rules of the centre.

Cooperatives that have emerged in recent years, often in completely new sectors, are called New Cooperatives. Most of their members have no experience with cooperatives and their economic interaction. Immigrants, agricultural producers and special consumer groups, cultural heritage groups, collectors of natural products, disabled, special occupational groups and well-educated, unemployed professionals form the membership. Typical areas of engagement are the following:

- Processing and marketing of own products (e.g. special agricultural products, collected items, handicrafts, mechanical wood processing, organic products)
- Marketing know-how and expertise
- Construction, conversion and cleaning work
- Office work, IT services, accounting
- Health care and social welfare tasks and welfare services (including home services and home nursing, care for children, the elderly and the disabled, and complementary health services)
- Intensifying and developing the activity in villages and districts)
- Production and marketing of services in the tourism industry (e.g. adventure and sustainable tourism)
- Procuring production equipment and machinery and sharing machinery (e.g., in agriculture)
- Electricity production
- Water management in rural areas (water cooperatives)
- Environmental services (e.g. waste disposal, recycling, landscape management, quality standards)

The new cooperatives that have emerged in Finland are usually small or medium-sized enterprises with an average of 24 to 30 members. To support their development, short (half-day) seminars were organised in different places. The necessary information and other practical questions were taken care of either by an unemployment association, the labour office or another local body. Representatives of the Ministry of Labour, the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare and the universities acted as lecturers. Later, representatives of the Coop Center Pellervo, the Finnish Confederation of cooperatives, i.e., also participated in providing a supportive infrastructure. From these beginnings, the supra-regional state project New Cooperatives developed under the leadership of the Coop

Center Pellervo. The media were interested from the very beginning and ensured the publication of relevant articles and further dissemination, reaching other potentially interested parties.

Since the corresponding figure for the other types of enterprises was around 40%, it can be assumed that the new cooperatives are doing well. Their success is, among other things, based on the possibilities that they help individuals to react to changes. One of these changes, especially meaningful in the Nordic countries, and in particular in Finland is the increasing prevalence of temporary, transient and short employment relationships. Working relationships, that had been previously rather untypical, are now almost the norm. While some companies complain about labour shortages, permanent employment contracts are becoming nevertheless rare. Work cooperatives are a possibility and a legal means for short-term work and thus create a counterweight to undeclared work.

In addition to the well-educated, active and entrepreneurial founders of *work cooperatives*, those who have no opportunities in the labour market because of their age, often find employment possibilities for themselves with cooperatives —maybe even more in third sectors. In addition, a production cooperative can also be a so-called social enterprise that actively rehabilitates those who are excluded from the labour market or threatened by exclusion.

Being employed in a cooperative, a previously unemployed person will gain a goal and a fixed point in life again. At best, it is also an alternative way outside.

Whether this can be driven into sustainable cooperative development is difficult to foresee. In addition to financial and general economic aspects, political aspects play an important role —especially the legislature can have a decisive impact. This way, quasi-economic aspects also play a role —the difficulty is, however, that law is an instrument, depending on and establishing formal equality, but neglects the fact that such an approach is limited: cooperatives are on the one hand participants on the market, and as such tied into the system of formal equality, finding its utmost expression in the rules of the contract. On the other hand, the terms and conditions of the contracts are very different, sometimes this can lead beyond the formal terms and conditions.

6. Conclusions and prospective

The compulsion to a certain kind of globalisation means not least that the cooperative societies come under pressure —mind: the coop-

erative societies, not the cooperatives alone, enter into a new context; the direction and kind of the movement is by no means clear. We find the opening of perspectives for cooperatives as a form of enterprise and for production, consumption and finance: to the extent to which globalisation is a movement to further unification and standardisation, it breaks up niches for goods and services that remain—or newly emerge—outside the box. As such they deal with distinct economies of scale and also with a distinct understanding of innovation. Open is if new technologies and AI, with this for instance the reduction of setup times, the “miniaturisation” of office and/or work bank, the increased mobility and flexibility to name but a few, allow maintaining this competitive advantage.

The current situation can be compared to a socio-individual overdrive: the actual socialisation has taken on dimensions that the individual can no longer keep up with. To use the famous image of the hamster wheel, one can say that the wheel turns faster than the hamster can run. First of all, the default option is set up in such a way that the individual is expected to cope with the challenges on his or her own—this is one of the fundamental contradictions of the capitalist economy because socialisation and forced individualisation go hand in hand: socialisation in its prevailing form depends on isolating individuals from each other, this way stimulating a two-track process: social mechanisms that define such mutual isolation as advantageous are structurally predetermined. At the same time, everybody aims on establishing him/herself precisely as individuals—as singularity if we follow Andreas Reckwitz.

This opens as well a new perspective for the cooperative as an organisational form of the individual enterprise.

The peripheral location of the Nordic countries in no way shields them from the need to address the issues that dominate the international debate. These include the central issues of social investment and economic efficiency in socio-political research. More fundamental is, however, the underlying premise that gain is a predominant or even separated mode of regulation—earlier this had been outlined concerning Karl Polanyi.

“While it is common to agree with the title of the first chapter of Mark Fisher’s book, suggesting that it’s easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, one should not overlook that the capitalist formation is coming again and again under severe threat, hinting at a system crisis: the cyclically reoccurring rejection of a perceived dichotomisation of the process of socialisation. While the

disintegration of use value and exchange value stands at the centre, the disintegration of economic and political life plays a role as well. Points of reference in social science are for instance the juxtaposition of system and lifeworld, mechanical and organic solidarity, community and society, and closer to economics the complementarity of accumulation regime and mode of regulation.” (Polanyi, 1957)

In all cases, we are dealing with basic tensions that can hardly be resolved as a contradiction but must nevertheless be dealt with. Currently, the existing technical possibilities provide the foundation for processes of enormous socialisation in the field of material production—the production of any good is connected to the production of all other goods, and the production in one place has direct connections to what happens in other places; nevertheless, human activities are on the other hand still, and perhaps even more than ever before, limited to individual development and action and development or action in a small space.

In the “modern economy”, shaped by extreme forms of division—and even separation—of labour, any sense of meaning in the activity is removed; work-related communication is reduced to a somewhat extended formula of the 0-1 principle of digitality—including short-termism. Targeted social interventions can be developed, and efficiency and effectiveness are not a problem—realistically, however, we are dealing with a production of gaps and voids. Paradoxically, we find with the increasing distancing of productive processes both, from nature and use value—amongst others the sector model as it is presented by Fisher, Clark and Fourastié is presenting this process of distancing—an increasing meaning of communicative action and “free spaces for creation” as part of the productive processes. It is the world of design and shine, economically moving along the abyss, being permanently exposed to the impending demise in a bursting bubble.

But this constellation is also opening spaces for cooperatives and a revival of cooperative societies: the principles of cooperative organisation—understood as principles of living are the often asked-for lines of a new renaissance. As such this goes beyond the negative orientation of many civil society notions—being non-governmental and non-profit—and aim on providing a positive alternative.

One of the big disadvantages is that financing is under the given conditions problematic. Striving for competitiveness in the market is not readily an option. At the same time, the notion of competitiveness is not applicable in the simple form as both, the character of the products, the relation between the product, producer and customer

and the market are going to change. Examples are “inclusive value” as a higher environmental standard and special distribution rules or additional “productive value” by way of different working conditions and the workers’ control over the working process. Part of this changed constellation is given by the fact that today’s cooperative agencies are not defined as communities of necessity; instead, they are pools of creativity, the will and ability to innovate, the willingness to experiment and question, to take up challenges and new technologies, etc.

A very important part of this change is given by the fact that a way of life, which is summed up in the words of the slogan: the private is political, the political is private, is taken seriously.

In the end, it is important to mention the danger of instrumentalization and appropriation by politics as a concern. The classification of two forms of cooperatives as it could be found in Italy is highly problematic as the criteria had been given by the proximity to the mainstream economy: cooperatives had been welcome as auxiliary forms but not as independent alternatives. Related problems can also be seen in Finland: financial and/or political manipulation and instrumentalization play a major role today with the new type of cooperatives. It cannot be denied that the leading functionaries of these cooperatives often have a certain affinity with the state bureaucracy.

As mentioned before, cooperatives have often been seen as a solution to many capitalist upheavals, such as rising incomes. However, even in Finland, cooperatives are not growing their share in the field of business forms. Even though various arguments, like the inequality of wealth distribution, overuse of natural resources, ecologically unsustainable agriculture and unsustainable housing construction, speak for cooperative business forms. The advantages of cooperatives are also emphasized by referring e.g. to the positive moral effect of cooperative activities and the increase in willingness to cooperate.

Despite the ups and downs in Finland, cooperatives have not remained a marginal phenomenon, but they represent an internationally established form of business activity. Since the 1990s, Finnish cooperative activities began to regain popularity and recognition as alternative business activities. Although here too, a certain kind of growth towards the original idea of novelty activities can be observed; there are significant large cooperatively organized operators in Finland, but many of the new cooperative enterprises are, by the original idea, small and regionally limited operators. This does not reduce the importance of cooperative activity and its examination, but on the contrary, it emphasizes it.

The most significant matter in cooperatives is the democratic community, creating a model of joint responsibility, experiencing togetherness and the mental commitment to the common values and principles of the social community, which holds the community together. If a cooperative wants to reform and develop, it must first find itself, know its past and honestly evaluate its future path. Otherwise, cooperative activity stands on the old foundation, that is, on the foundation that has perhaps already changed to such an extent that our interpretation backwards and at the same time proactively forwards, has become blurred.

The world of values influencing the background of the economy is at the moment, a fascinatingly current and thought-provoking set of topics. The most innovative and firmly in tune with the present the latest Finnish speech is economist Sixten Korkman's latest book "Economy and Humanism" (2022). Korkman believes that economists talk too little about values. He focuses on his examination of the roots of the market economy and capitalism, i.e., specifically the core issues when talking about the values of cooperative activity and human perception. Korkman refers to Hegel's dialectic, emphasizing how humanity has moved from one insight to another in the values and human image of cooperative activity. ICA started in the year 2022 a process, of renewing the values and principles of cooperative activity that will last until the end of the year 2023.

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