

Expanded abstract

Public policies to promote cooperativism in the framework of social economy ecosystems. A comparative analysis in the Valencian Community and Emilia Romagna

Objectives

The article typifies, analyses, and compares the public policies promoting cooperativism in two prominent European social economy ecosystems, doing so from the standpoint of their legal frameworks, strategic areas, cooperative federations, and cooperativism promotion programs. This objective stems from the following research questions: (1) How does the “Institutions and Public Policies” dimension develop within the Social Economy ecosystems in the Valencian Community and Emilia Romagna? (2) Are the policies applied in both regions innovative and belonging to the second generation? (3) What strengths and weaknesses do these policies have, what future challenges do they present, and how can the two regions learn from each other?

Methodology

The methodology adopts a qualitative approach, given the multifaceted nature of public policies. The study employs a case study technique, using interviews, focus groups, documentary analysis and questionnaires. The documentary analysis includes the examination of legislation, reports, institutional websites and databases from both regions. The main documents for analysis are the Plan for the Support and Promotion of Cooperativism of the Valencian Community 2021-2022 and the Third Biennial Report on the State of Cooperativism in Emilia Romagna 2020-2021.

The cases studied are the Valencian Community and Emilia Romagna, both known for their strong cooperative traditions. Emilia Romagna’s cooperatives are rooted in historical movements, with notable cooperative federations. The region stands out for its high cooperative turnover and employment. In Valencian Community, cooperativism has a long history, especially in agriculture, with periods of growth and decline. The cooperative model has diversified, above all, into associative labour cooperatives, which have become the most developed branch.

Two classifications are used to assess public policies on cooperativism in both regions. Firstly, the distinction between first and second generation policies by Chaves and Gallego (2020); and secondly, the categorisation of specific cooperative promotion programmes (PEFC), general business promotion programmes (PGFE) and cooperative development initiatives (IDC) by Chaves et al. (2023).

Results

On the basis of the methodology used, cooperativism in both territories is characterised in terms of its legal framework, strategic areas, cooperative federations and programmes to promote cooperativism.

There are notable differences in the configuration of the legal frameworks for the promotion of cooperativism: in the Valencian Community there is a comprehensive law that regulates cooperatives in a detailed manner, while in Emilia Romagna there are several regional laws that refer to different types of cooperatives, regulated by an open framework that allows for many initiatives that are not explicitly mentioned.

In terms of areas of cooperativism, both regions have biennial strategic objectives to promote cooperativism, which are closely aligned with each other and with the 2030 Agenda. However, the way they are implemented is different: while the Valencian Community outlines them in a non-legally binding regional plan, Emilia Romagna frames them in legally binding resolutions, leading to a public call for projects related to these strategic areas.

With regard to the cooperative federations in both regions, their presence is crucial in terms of supporting entities. However, in terms of public policies, the Valencian Community provides greater economic support to its associations than its Italian counterpart.

In terms of cooperativism support programmes, cooperatives in Emilia Romagna are more inclined to benefit from general business promotion programmes (PGFE), while in the Valencian Community cooperatives gravitate towards specific cooperative promotion programmes (PEFC).

Finally, with regard to the categorisation of the first or second generation of social economy public policies, the main finding is that the Valencian policies can be clearly identified as belonging to the second generation, due to the comprehensive plan for the promotion of cooperativism, involving different parts of the public administration, collaboration with universities and specific indicators for monitoring and evaluation. Emilia Romagna, on the other hand, is in a transitional phase and has no comparable plan. The region shows some second-generation features, such as cooperation between the public administration and the sector in defining thematic areas for the promotion of cooperativism, but also retains some first-generation aspects. The absence of a regional plan limits the alignment with other government strategies compared to the Valencian case.

Conclusions

Valencian Community has made a greater effort than Emilia Romagna to implement specific public policies to promote cooperativism; however, cooperativism in the Italian region has twice the number of entities and four times the number of cooperative jobs. The legislative and budgetary efforts in Valencian cooperativism in 2020, 2021 and 2022 have improved its situation compared to previous years, but cannot be equated with the effective cooperative development in the Emilia Romagna region, despite its more modest policy deployment.

Challenges in the Valencian Community include difficulties in the implementation of strategic areas, potential coordination problems between public administrations, limited awareness of specific programmes among cooperatives and a non-binding plan to promote cooperatives. Strengths, however, include strong link between public administrations and cooperative associations and a cross-sectoral approach in the cooperative support plan developed through social dialogue. In Emilia Romagna, weaknesses show in the form of unclear access to cooperative support and the programmes dependence on federations. However, notable strengths include an innovative data collection system and comprehensive biennial reports. The study recommends mutual learning between the regions, suggesting that Emilia Romagna formulate a comprehensive cooperative support plan and the systematization of the plan evaluation in Valencian Community.

The research contributes empirical evidence on effective cooperative support policies, aligning with social economy literature and exploring the concept of social economy ecosystems for replicability in similar territories. Future research directions may lead to a comparative analysis with similar European regions, acknowledging data limitations for more in-depth study.