

Expanded abstract

Centennial Agricultural Cooperatives in Catalonia: Characteristics and contribution to the SDGs

Objectives

“Cooperatives represent a form of organisation with a large presence all over the world” (Illiopoulos et al., 2018) and are economic and social agents with a long and extensive presence in the agricultural sector, as well as being one of the essential instruments of rural development (Gallego, 2007). Cooperatives are mainly organisations based on the alignment of their members (Jussila et al. 2012) and on long-term relationships. Within the Social Economy, cooperatives carry out their activities under the premises of cooperative values and principles, becoming essential actors in the fulfilment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Vil-laescusa, 2019). Referring to agri-food cooperatives, Mozas and Bernal (2020) highlight them as institutions that constitute the backbone of the Social Economy, representing one of the basic instruments of rural development (Gallego, 2007).

Catalonia is the precursor of the cooperative movement in Spain (Aymerich, J.; 2005). Agricultural cooperatives in Catalonia are characterised by an extraordinary longevity in which more than a quarter (33%) have reached a century of survival (Anuari Socioeconòmic FCAC, 2022). Despite this longevity, these organizations have faced major difficulties such as size, ageing and generational renewal, among others.

The aim of this paper is, firstly, to ascertain and analyse the longevity of Catalan agricultural cooperatives and the elements that define them and, secondly, to study their contribution to the fulfilment of the SDGs.

Design and methods

Based on an initial work carried out by Montegut and Plana-Farran (2019) on centenary agricultural cooperatives in Catalonia, a compilation of the current number of centennial agricultural cooperatives in this area has been compiled. Once this number has been obtained by collecting information from the register of the Federació de Cooperatives Agràries de Catalunya (FCAC), the characteristics of these cooperatives and the different types of capital present are analysed using Bourdieu’s Theory of Capital (1986).

Using Bourdieu’s theory, we have established a series of variables which may be key factors in the success of co-operatives in terms of their survival and the contribution they make to the fulfilment of the SDGs. We analyze whether these variables contribute significantly to their longevity, or whether other factors such as the territory in which they are located, their

relationship with it, and the social purpose they pursue, are also factors that influence their survival. In relation to social capital, the variables number of members, board of directors and membership of second-degree cooperatives will be studied. In relation to economic capital, the variables turnover, exports, credit sections, designations of origin and agro-shop will be considered. Related to cultural capital, the variables of training, services and supplies to members will be analyzed.

Finally, a study will also be carried out on the contribution of this particular type of agricultural cooperative, the centenarian, to the SDGs, following on from previous work (Mozas, 2019).

Results

The longevity of agricultural cooperatives in Catalonia represents a key aspect, as 33% of them have been in existence for more than 100 years without interruption. Some common characteristics of this type of organisation can be observed, such as a sense of “militancy” among their members, even though they are not producers, the small size of these organisations, a strong relationship between the agricultural sector in which they operate and the area in which these “social businesses” are located, as well as the existence of strong ties between the organizations and the members, who seek to satisfy their interests through the services and supplies they can offer.

In terms of their contribution to achieving the SDGs, we can state that these century-old cooperatives are effective and transparent, participatory and representative institutions (Goal 16), that they contribute to food production in a more responsible way (Goal 12), that they facilitate the creation and continuity of economic structure and activity (Goal 9), and that they are able to build partnerships, collaborative agreements and inclusive alliances (especially at regional and local level) on principles and values, as well as on a shared vision and shared objectives that focus first on people and the environment. These activities carried out by these century-old cooperatives in rural areas contribute to slowing down depopulation in this environment (Objective 17). In addition, the training provided in agri-food cooperatives to their members is settled as a fundamental basis for driving any change or progress (Objective 4).

Limitations and future research

The descriptive analysis of the study represents one of its main limitations. The impossibility of conducting interviews with the main actors in agri-food cooperatives makes it difficult to carry out a detailed analysis of the elements that have led to the longevity of these organisations and their contribution to the achievement of the SDGs. Within the theory of capital, it has not been possible to delve deeper into the description of symbolic capital, as elements such as accumulated prestige and honour are difficult to analyse without the opinion of the members of agri-food cooperatives. Future avenues for research are related to conceptualisation and possible “coexistence” of studies of agricultural cooperativism and family farms, taking into account the description of cooperatives as “a family of families”. On the other hand, it is worth highlighting the need to carry out a qualitative study subsequent to this work, aimed at obtaining information from direct sources from the key actors involved in agricultural cooperativism.