

## EXPANDED ABSTRACT

### How can the competitiveness of agro-food cooperatives be improved?

#### Objectives

The environment of high competitiveness that exists in agro-food markets has significantly increased the pressure on all the agents that operate in them. In the case of cooperatives, possibly due to their small business size, this issue is of particular importance as it encourages these entities to adopt changes that pursue to improve their competitiveness, ensuring their survival. There is a good number of papers that partially analyze the role of different aspects of management on the competitiveness of cooperatives (Juliá et al., 2012; Arcas, 2002; Moyano et al., 2008; among others). In previous work, we have selected a set of six elements of management that are crucial to the competitiveness of agrifood cooperatives, they are known as DIDIFO, which stands for Dimension (size) – Internationalization – Diversification – Innovation – Formation (training) – (market) Orientation (Lajara & Server, 2016). The contribution to a better performance in companies is undoubtable but the degree of relative importance among these elements has not yet been addressed. What is more relevant for a cooperative to increase its competitiveness, to improve its size or to diversify its portfolio? The objective of this work is to establish a hierarchy of aspects in business management that affect the success and competitiveness of agro-food cooperatives.

#### Method

This question could only be answered using a qualitative approach. For this work, an expert consultation has been carried out using the Delphi method in order to obtain an order of importance as perceived by the sector. A number of experts were selected and grouped according to their relationship to cooperatives: representative associations, local government, universities and cooperative staff. They were asked to order the factors as well as to include any other aspect they found interesting related to the topic. The questionnaire was sent by e-mail and two rounds of consultation were needed to achieve a degree of consensus and stability.

#### Results

28 valid answers were collected after the second round. In this phase, either consensus or stability was achieved in all the questions. Results permit the formulation of a proposal of hierarchy even if experts could not agree on a unique order. Both market orientation and innovation have been pointed

as the most outstanding elements by experts in order to improve the current competitiveness of Spanish agro-food cooperatives. Diversification occupies the second place in the ranking, followed by size, internationalization and training. There is consensus in the positions of market orientation and diversification and also in the rest of the factors, there is a level of stability that shows that answers would not change in following rounds.

### **Conclusions**

Market orientation and innovation are elements that have been proposed by consensus as the most relevant when it comes to encouraging competitiveness. This result is consistent with the current stream of management in which the need to satisfy not only the customer but the market is high. In addition, in a sector such as agro-food in which commodities abound, it is vital to seek differentiation and one of the most effective ways to achieve this is innovation.

The following factors with respect to importance are dimension (size), internationalization and training. Particularly noteworthy is the latter aspect, training, as it highlights one of the problems that traditionally has been attributed to the sector which is the lack of professionalization. We can say that the fact that it has been categorized as the least important factor within the proposed ones denotes in some way that this mentality in the sector still persists.

In future research it would be interesting to analyze whether there are significant differences between the different groups of experts who have participated in the study, that is, if managers of cooperatives have opinions that are statistically different from those provided by the researchers or the staff of the Administration. In addition, it could be explored whether two types of factors could be established: a group of cross-cutting elements that enhance other aspects (eg training) and a more specific one, integrated by innovation or internationalization.

### **Contribution**

This work helps to increase the existing evidence about management in cooperatives. This kind of business can be a way of empowering employees in new founded- companies that are coming up in this revolution post-crisis. But to give them the opportunity of surviving and succeed, we still need to find strategies to update the way they are managed. Results of this paper show that effort has to be placed mainly in market orientation and innovation but keeping in mind that there is still a problem of professionalization in the sector.

**KEYWORDS:** Agrifood cooperatives, competitiveness, education, innovation, internacionalization, market orientation, delphi.