

Louvain School of Management

Practices of members' involvement in multi-stakeholder cooperatives

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Introduction

1. Context setting

This research focuses on cooperatives and particularly on the involvement of members within these. The cooperative is a form of company the specificity of which is to place the human being at the heart of its project. This concept is a model of social enterprise based on the values of democracy, equality and collaboration. The main mission of a cooperative is to encourage the participation of the various actors, called cooperators, and to promote collaboration throughout the achievement of the project. A physical or moral person (companies, financial sponsors or institutional investors) can become a cooperator by acquiring shares in a cooperative. The distinctive feature of cooperators lies in the fact that they must be involved in the project in a concrete manner.

In October 2018, the international Labour Office (International Labour Office, 2018) voted to adopt the ILO guidelines on statistics of cooperatives. Among them is the adoption of a new proposal for redefining the types of cooperators that International Co-operative Alliance (ICA), Eurisec and Ciriec researchers have jointly come up with. This proposal presents four types of cooperatives: producer cooperatives, worker cooperatives, consumer/user cooperatives and multi-stakeholder cooperatives.

This thesis will essentially focus on one form of cooperatives, which is still little known, the multi-stakeholder cooperatives. In this specific case, the topic of members' involvement remains even more of a challenge as it involves different categories of cooperators and there is only little information available in this area so far. On top of that, the interest in studying these cooperatives also lies in the fact that they respond to more than a single goal.

In February 2019, the Belgian Chamber approved a reform of the company law that involves reducing the company categories from seventeen to only four: company, private company, public limited company and cooperative company. Until now, many companies had adopted the legal form of cooperatives for practical reasons, without complying with the values and principles. This reform implies that number of them will have to shift to one of the other three categories as they no longer correspond to the cooperative society (Belga, 2019).

2. Research question

The research topic was inspired by three elements: two sets of courses I followed during my studies, a non-academic project and finally a course in social entrepreneurship.

First, the desire to write a Master's thesis oriented towards social entrepreneurship came from the combination of a Minor in Entrepreneurial Spirit which is offered as part of the Bachelor Degree at UCLouvain and a Major in Corporate Sustainable Management. The purpose was to get the opportunity to put into practice the courses' takeaways.

In addition, I participated in extra-curricular activities and got involved in a student association called Academics For Development, where multidisciplinary teams develop entrepreneurial projects with a social impact. In the search for new projects, the association had noticed that in Belgium, some people are currently living isolated in some villages since they cannot access essential goods due to the lack of local retailers. A project was created with the aim to help people with reduced mobility to access a range of products initially found in larger and more popular areas, that can often be 30 minutes away from small villages. The objective was to reinstate a local business by preferably using local producers in order to maintain these populations in their villages. It was obvious from the start that the residents needed to be involved in the project. Also, to make the project a success, the team was supported by a multi-entrepreneur, Alexis Thuysbaert. After meeting with a doctoral student from UCL who was writing a thesis on cooperatives' matters, it was decided the project should take the legal form of a cooperative and, more importantly a cooperative that involves all actors; namely customers and producers. The student emphasized that the involvement of these actors in the project was crucial in order to maintain good contact with the producers. Next to this, customers have to be involved as well because the project is entirely dedicated to them and aims to respond to one of their needs, benefitting from a local business in the village. The team defined the principles and the project was continued in the following year by another team of students who tackled more practical aspects.

Finally, during the Major in Corporate Sustainable Management, I took a course in social entrepreneurship given by Dr. Frédéric Dufays, this thesis supervisor. As part of this course, we were asked to develop a case study based on an existing social and sustainable entrepreneurial activity. The purpose was to identify the challenges being faced by the chosen organisation and offer appropriate solutions. NewB Cooperative Bank was selected; the bank was seeking to obtain a banking licence but lacked proof of sufficient funds; as a matter of

fact, in the event of a crisis the bank would not have sufficient equity to repay its debts. This exercise helped to raise awareness on issues that cooperatives, and more specifically a multi-stakeholder cooperative, may be facing. Therefore, studying further the concept of multi-stakeholder cooperatives appeared to be a great opportunity.

In the course of my Bachelor Degree, we did not approach the social economy so thoroughly. The three abovementioned elements therefore helped to become familiar with the concept of cooperatives and gave rise to the following research subject as part of the Master Degree: "Practices of members' involvement in multi-stakeholder cooperatives". The objective of the thesis is firstly to review the literature in order to reflect the existing mechanisms of stakeholders' involvement in cooperatives. Then, thanks to the empirical section of this research where existing cooperatives will be analysed, the aim is to identify the involvement mechanisms used in cooperatives nowadays and distinguish those that should be promoted from those to be best avoided. In the end, some practical recommendations will be offered to the cooperatives that were studied and discussed as part of this research.

3. Structure of the thesis

The thesis will first analyse the literature on stakeholder engagement, the characteristics and functioning of cooperatives as well as the motivations of cooperators to become involved in such organisations. This will lead us to discuss more specifically the question of members' involvement in multi-stakeholder cooperatives. The second section will cover the empirical research carried out within selected multi-stakeholder cooperatives and the analysis of interviews conducted with their coordinator. The comparative analysis of the organisations and their practices will help us to identify the key elements of involvement mechanisms. Finally, the last section will offer ground for discussion, draw research conclusions and make recommendations to the cooperatives we studied.

Theoretical Part

The title of this thesis mentions the term "members' involvement". According to Neveu (1991), while "engagement" refers to a formal relationship between an individual and his work, "involvement" rather indicates the relationship that an individual maintains thanks to his voluntary behaviour. In the words of Neveu (1991), there is a translation issue for researchers, which brings them to explain the meaning of the term to use as the two words are often considered as synonyms in the literature.

For the purpose of the present work, it has been decided to use the term "involvement" in order to refer to the implication of members in cooperatives. There is a voluntary attitude in cooperators' approach, which makes the notion of "involvement" more appropriate. In opposition, stakeholders such as customers and suppliers have a more formal relationship; they can be bound by a contract, triggering a "commitment" to the company. For this reason and as an exception, the first chapter will use the term of "stakeholders' engagement", which seems to be the reference term in the literature when making reference to stakeholders.

1. Stakeholder engagement

The first chapter aims to introduce the involvement of members in cooperatives by analysing stakeholder engagement and governance in depth. These are key aspects when talking about cooperatives and the way they engage cooperators in their activities.

First of all, before defining the notion of engagement, it seems important to define the notion of "stakeholder". According to a writing from the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors, RICS, this term covers *"anyone that can affect or is affected by what you are trying to achieve"* or *"individuals or groups who have an interest in the project, programme or portfolio because they are involved in the work or affected by the outcomes"* (MacNicol, Giffin, Mansell, 2014, p. 6). Therefore, employees, suppliers, clients, end consumers, local communities, governments, NGO can be considered as stakeholders. Stakeholder engagement is a key component of governance.

In a context of companies' growing need for transparency, stakeholders wish to know more about the companies' actions and they want to be able to give their opinion. This is why it is

important to involve them and maintain a relationship based on trust. To illustrate the employees as stakeholders, a recent study from Ipsos, Boston Consulting Group (BCG) and Conférence des grandes écoles (CGE) (2018), demonstrates that nearly 70% of the younger generation of workers want to find meaning in their work. Indeed, the subjective relationship to work has changed and workers are now increasingly looking for meaning in their work; a way to achieve personal fulfilment or to give meaning to their lives. They are no longer looking to make money only but want to be part of a higher purpose and engage in their company (Cultiaux, Vendramin, 2010). This means that the worker must feel satisfied about the work he is doing, be under the impression that he is contributing a stone to the building and share the company's values. According to a study by École des hautes études commerciales du Nord (EDHEC, 2017), many young graduates are turning to the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) sector, seeking for a meaningful work with positive impact. This example is a demonstration of the evolution of stakeholders' expectations.

Literature helps to understand from a theoretical point of view why and how to engage stakeholders. Lauren Smith and Christine Woods' (2015) analysis of stakeholder management through a social approach gives some insight on the topic. They present a model for managing and involving stakeholders by making use of three key elements: identity, governance and legitimacy. Companies need to be guided by their *identity*. The values of the organisations are reflected in the identity and its actions are expected to be in line, offering the stakeholders confidence in the way the company acts. *Governance* implies that the board is composed of members with different opinions and that they consider the stakeholders' skills and points of view. Transparency is the watchword, which implies accountability in the decision-making process. *Legitimacy* means that the organisation must accomplish its mission by creating value and demonstrate results, which encourages stakeholder engagement. In addition, it is through legitimacy that stakeholders determine their support for the organisation and, therefore, whether they are willing to engage with it (Smith, Woods, 2015).

As mentioned above and as authors Berrone, Cennamo, Cruz, and Gomez-Mejia (2012) remind us, companies are increasingly aware of the real need to address a broader concern than merely maximizing economic value. Because companies intended to satisfy more of the broader stakeholders' needs, they have to work towards identifying them. It is therefore important to be proactive with stakeholders instead of waiting for issues to arise before acting. The article of Berrone et al (2012) offers two emerging and opposing viewpoints. First, the instrumental perspective, which proposes that greater attention paid to stakeholders would be

a mean of indirectly satisfying their well-being. Second, the normative approach, where the main idea is to satisfy the desires of the stakeholders because it is naturally the right thing to do (Berrone, Cennamo, Cruz, and Gomez-Mejia, 2012)

From a more concrete point of view, MacNicol, Griffin and Mansell (2014) have identified the key elements to involve stakeholders in organisations. Stakeholder engagement mainly includes meeting their needs, offering as little opposition as possible to their support and ensuring outstanding communication. Care must be taken in case the opinion of a stakeholder does not respect the company's mission; it would be understandable to decide not to take it into account. This shows that stakeholders' commitment requires management, which can be defined as "*the systematic identification, analysis, planning and implementation of actions designed to engage with stakeholders*" (MacNicol, Giffin, Mansell, 2014, p. 8). The RICS Professional Guidance suggests ten principles with a direct impact on stakeholder engagement. Each of these principles influences the others and together represent practices to be applied in order to achieve positive results (MacNicol, Griffin, Mansell, 2014).

Principle 1: Communicate

Issues in communication inevitably lead to a poor understanding of the objectives and mission, and eventually to low quality work. For this reason, organisations must ensure mutual understanding; by using the right communication medium and by verifying proper interpretation of the information.

Principle 2: Consult early and often

The advantage of consulting stakeholders in a timely manner is that any possible misunderstanding can be corrected promptly. Misinterpretation may be due to a fear to ask questions and, as a consequence, show some form of weakness. However, when this consultation is offered by a superior, stakeholders will feel grateful to be consulted. It also makes possible the exchange of information and ideas about the project.

Principle 3: Remember they're only human

It should not be forgotten that the stakeholders are human beings who do not necessarily act in a reasonable way and are therefore unpredictable beings. This is why it is very important to understand the intentions of each stakeholder in order to better understand their motivation to engage and their subsequent behaviour.

Principle 4: Plan it

It is increasingly common to think that planning for member participation would lead to better engagement. Planning involves distributing work tasks and resources that will be available to help. It is necessary to apply a methodology based on dialogue and avoid falling into an unconscious routine. As stakeholders are often unpredictable, a certain level of flexibility should also be allowed. Commitment must be encouraged and the achievement of milestones highlighted.

Principle 5: Relationships are key

According to this principle, the ability to establish relationships is more valuable than any other. This leads to increased stakeholders' support. Getting a job or receiving contracts from a client are some examples of advantage of good relationships between stakeholders. It is therefore essential for leaders to take the time to secure good relationships with stakeholders so that they feel more involved and trustful.

Principle 6: Simple, but not easy

RICS mentions that stakeholder engagement requires mobilizing empathy and listening mainly. However, because these skills are not straightforward, it is not an easy achievement and there is a need to encourage and communicate constantly with project managers about progress.

Principle 7: Just part of managing risk

Stakeholder engagement is an integral part of risk management because of the impact of their behaviour on projects. But it is sometimes difficult to estimate the time and effort required to spend on stakeholder engagement. Their influence on the project must be considered as a category of risk but also of opportunity to make a real impact. The best way to evaluate this is to define a matrix with the impact of each stakeholder according to their level of influence and the level of support or rejection for the project. This allows the company to be more cautious with stakeholders involving a high risk.

Principle 8: Compromise

There are no project management theories that offer solutions to solve trade-offs. Most often, and wrongly because such judgment is risky, it is done intuitively. To find the best

compromise, it is a good idea to establish a hierarchy of stakeholders in order to determine a relationship of priorities. Then, the best compromise should be chosen according to this ranking, always keeping in mind the fundamental objectives of the project.

Principle 9: Understand what success is

According to the RICS, there are many techniques available to evaluate the success of a project (considering the total costs, time and quality of the final project compared to the forecasts or by evaluating the contribution to the organisation), but the best way to measure it would be to assess the degree of satisfaction of all stakeholders. The success of a project is a subjective concept. For example, a project may be considered a success by some stakeholders even if it does not meet the initial expectations, because the relationships secured during the project were a more important achievement, while success for a project manager can come from an analysis of the different contributions of each individual.

Principle 10: Take responsibility

It is important that a project's member takes responsibility for stakeholder engagement and communication with stakeholders. In reality, an individual is not always pre-designated for that role but it remains essential. This responsibility includes ensuring clarity of roles and accountability to the project manager (MacNicol, Giffin, Mansell, 2014).

1.1. Governance

Corporate governance is rooted in a movement towards accountability with greater transparency within companies in general. According to the Federal Public Service Economy, corporate governance in the broad sense is defined as "*the system by which companies are managed and controlled. Corporate governance therefore concerns the functioning and internal control of a company but also its relationship with the various stakeholders in all its fields of activity*" (SPF Economie, 2018, Qu'est-ce que la gouvernance d'entreprise?, para. 1). The Belgian Corporate Governance Code from its part defines governance as "*covering a set of rules and behaviours that determine how companies are managed and controlled*" (SPF Economie, 2018, Qu'est-ce que la gouvernance d'entreprise?, para. 2). This term refers to the possible relationship between shareholders, the board of directors, managers and, finally, stakeholders.

Good governance requires respecting the interests of the company, its shareholders and its stakeholders. In addition, it requires a good integration into the company's values, proposing leadership mechanisms and finally transparency and integrity in the decision-making process. Corporate governance allows objectives to be set in order to best assess performance, risk management and supervision of compliance with rules and processes (SPF Economie, 2018).

In conclusion, this chapter on stakeholder engagement and governance in companies allows us to contextualize the subject of the research. Today's stakeholders want to receive increasingly more information about companies, understand their opportunities and challenges, and be able to give their opinion and share their thoughts. This context of responsibility and engagement has changed the way companies consider the expectations of their stakeholders and the ways in which they can be involved. Good stakeholder management and relevant governance can be considered as a leverage for creating company's value. In the next chapter, we will apply these concepts to cooperatives specifically. This form of company puts commitment at the heart of its system; that's why it makes it relevant to deal with this subject (MacNicol, Giffin, Mansell, 2014).

2. Cooperatives

2.1. Definition

There are many definitions of a cooperative in the literature. This section aims to give a global view of this concept. A cooperative is mainly a company focusing on its members. Cooperatives are in principle controlled by their members, who work together around common objectives. Originally, the differentiation was made with traditional joint-stock companies because the management methods were very different. This is a new democratic form of organisation, operating under the "one member, one vote" rule. This implies that each member has the same voting right, and this is totally independent of the capital invested in the organisation. The profits created by a cooperative will either be reinvested in the cooperative itself or redistributed among the cooperators. Cooperatives are guided by their own values more than by the continuous pursuit of profit and their concerns are rather oriented towards fairness and social justice. The aim is to create sustainable businesses and therefore create prosperous jobs in the long term (SPF Economie, 2018 ; International Co-operative Alliance Official Website, 2018 ; Dufays, 2018). Finally, the cooperative form is a type of organisation

that is part of a broader social enterprise movement. For that reason, it seems important to set out that a social enterprise is based on several pillars. First, the social mission forms a common objective for the benefit of the community. Second, it is an entrepreneurial activity, i.e. the activity includes the production and sale of goods or services by employees and involves as a consequence an economic risk. And finally, governance aims to be as democratic as possible while offering a certain level of autonomy (Dufays, 2018).

The cooperative is part of a social economy model, which remains in the shadow of the more traditional economy, based on a capitalist system. The social economy is based on a series of foundations defined in 2002 by the European Charter for the Social Economy. The charter identifies seven characteristics of the social economy:

- *Social economy, is based on the principle of solidarity and the commitment of people in a process of active citizenship*
- *Generates quality jobs and a better quality of life and offers a framework adapted to new forms of enterprise and work*
- *Plays an important role in local development and social cohesion*
- *Is socially responsible*
- *Is a factor of democracy*
- *Contributes to the stability and pluralism of economic markets*
- *Responds to the European Union's strategic priorities and objectives: cohesion social, full employment and the fight against poverty, participatory democracy, better governance, sustainable development (European Charter of the Social Economy, 2002, Une Réalité incontournable).*

2.1.1. Cooperative identity

The International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) defines cooperatives as follows: "An autonomous association of persons who have voluntarily come together to achieve their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations through a democratically managed and collectively owned enterprise." (International Co-operative Alliance, 2015, Definition of a Cooperative). For the purpose of this thesis, we will apply the definition of cooperative proposed by ICA. We will therefore consider that each cooperative's member has

a double identity; on the one hand, he is the owner and, on the other hand, he is the user. In the 19th century, the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers defined seven principles of cooperation, a proposed set of foundations for the functioning of cooperatives. Most of the cooperatives created around the world have been founded based on these principles. But it was not until the 20th century that they were officially adopted by the ICA and subsequently revised.

2.1.2. Principles

The International Co-operative Alliance sets out seven principles that guide cooperatives' identity and values under the name of the Rochdale Principles of Cooperation. However, the principles are not binding as there is no legal obligation to apply them (International Co-operative Alliance, 2015 ; Oczkowski, Krivokapic-Skoko, Plummer, 2013).

Voluntary and open membership

Firstly, the membership is totally voluntary and non-discriminatory to anyone willing to assume the responsibilities involved in joining the cooperative.

Democratic control by members

A cooperative is an organisation where members all have democratic control and participate actively in the decision-making. This principle is expressed by the "one person, one vote" rule at general meetings (Richez-Battesti, Defourny, 2017). Because of the mechanisms of participation and involvement, governance is operated differently. This point will be further developed in a below section.

Economic participation of members

The members contribute equitably to the capital invested in the cooperative. The income of the cooperative is allocated to developing the cooperative, paying the members (if it is applicable) or supporting other activities selected by mutual agreement.

Autonomy and independence

The ICA define cooperatives as autonomous entities, self-help organisations that are controlled by their members. Any action can only be carried out by respecting the democratic control and autonomy of its members. An example is when a cooperative seeks to raise capital other than through the association of a new cooperator.

Education, training and information

Cooperatives can specifically train their members with view to improving the management and development of the cooperative.

Cooperation between cooperatives

Cooperatives collaborate with each other through structures of different sizes (local, national, regional or international). The purpose is to strengthen the cooperative movement.

Concern for the community

The second objective of cooperatives is to contribute to the sustainable development of their communities thanks to actions validated by their respective members.

The abovementioned seven principles act as a guide for cooperatives around the world and are part of cooperative legislation (International Co-operative Alliance, 2015 ; Krivokapic-Skoko, Oczkowski, Plummer, 2013). The main concern about these principles lies with the fact that they were developed to suit any type of cooperatives. However, as it will be discussed in the next section, a cooperative can highly differ from any other, depending on the sector and its governance structure. As a consequence, it can be complex to implement these principles in specific cooperative structures (Cooperantics, n.d.).

2.1.3. Values

The International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) has also set out six core values on which cooperatives are founded and share with their members:

*Firstly, **self-help** means that people help each other whilst helping themselves by working together for mutual benefit. Secondly, **self-responsibility** stands for the individuals within cooperatives that act responsibly and play a full part in the organisation. Then, **democracy** means that the cooperative will be structured in a way that members have control over the organisation, so one member has one vote. Fourthly, **equality**, so each member will have equal rights and benefits according to their contribution. Then, **equity** means that members will be treated justly and fairly. And finally, **solidarity** meaning that members will support each other and other cooperatives (Somerville, 2007, p.7).*

2.2. Types of cooperatives

Cooperatives can be found in many sectors such as education, agriculture, retail, housing, bank, insurance or renewable energy and in different forms with different principles and characteristics.

A study conducted by the members of the ICA, the European Research Institute on Cooperative and Social Enterprises (Eurisce) and the International Research and Information Centre on the Public, Social and Cooperative Economy (Ciriec) identifies four main categories of cooperators by grouping them according to key characteristics. This study is based on the main interests of cooperative members and analysed nearly 200 types of cooperators. It is important to note that some of them could not be classified in these categories because they were too diversified. These four types of cooperatives were adopted by the International Labour Office "Guidelines concerning statistics of cooperatives" in October 2018 (International Labour Office, 2018).

2.2.1. Producer cooperatives

As its name suggests, this cooperative's interest lies in the production activity. The producer cooperative is owned by producers who decided to come together to sell their products. These cooperatives are most often individual artisanal or agricultural production companies but they can also be incorporated.

2.2.2. Worker cooperatives

In a worker cooperative, members come together under the same interest, which is the actual work provided by the cooperative. These members are individual workers who own the cooperative and manage it democratically.

2.2.3. Consumer/user cooperatives

Such cooperative is wholly owned by its members, who are the consumers of goods and services generated. The products are developed in line with the expectations of the members, therefore intuitively with those who will consume them. Although they also offer a service to producers, financial services cooperatives are classified as consumer cooperatives.

2.2.4. Multi-stakeholder cooperatives

The last type of cooperatives is owned by a multitude of stakeholders. Either more than one type of cooperators are represented in the company's governance and none of the cooperators holds a dominant position or the cooperatives is composed of several types of cooperators but only one type of cooperators predominates in the governance. This type of cooperatives embraces various actors such as employees, companies, producers, individuals, volunteers, public authorities, beneficiaries, associations and users. This model takes into account the cooperators' many and wide-ranged interests, which is thought to be a strength (International Labour Office, 2018 ; Boussole Entrepreneuriale Official website, 2017 ; Cooperantics coop Website, 2016).

The form of a multi-stakeholder cooperative is increasingly seen as an alternative offering a number of benefits. As a matter of fact, this model has democratic aspirations and offers a promise of efficiency and opportunities for the delegation of public services. In addition, it seems to be adapted to the current economic environment, where organisations' boundaries have become blurred. For example, the multi-stakeholder cooperative is well adapted to the collaborative economy, where the distinction between consumers and producers' roles has become less obvious and all actors work together with a common purpose. This form of cooperatives is therefore more complex given that it includes different types of cooperators but it represents an opportunity to answer current society's expectations (Compain, 2017). We will further develop this type of cooperatives in the empirical part of the thesis.

In conclusion, this chapter focused on cooperatives allows us to understand the concept of cooperatives, their principles and values. We have also identified the different forms of cooperatives according to the characteristics of their structure, purpose and sector. In the next chapter, we will focus on the cooperators and analyse how cooperatives involve their members.

3. Cooperators' involvement

After analysing cooperatives, their values, the principles defining the way they operate and their distinguishing features, we will now turn our attention more specifically to engaging in cooperatives. We will explore cooperators' motivations to get involved in these organisations,

as well as the existing types of cooperators. Next, we will tackle governance to understand to what extent cooperators are involved in cooperatives' leadership and decision-making process.

3.1. Members' motivations to participate

In order to get employees involved in the success of a company, it is important to understand first how to motivate them to cooperate. Similarly, to understand the reasons why cooperators are willing to participate in cooperatives, it is important to be aware of their motivations.

Goussia-Rizou, Giannouli and Makris, Sdrali (2016) examined the motivations of cooperators, revealing some essential factors. Based on a diversified sample, this study analysed a series of possible motivational factors that can be grouped into five categories. The first group refers to intrinsic motivations while the remaining four groups refer to extrinsic motivations.

On the one hand, "intrinsic motivations" refers to the cooperatives' commitment to *personal values* and *personal interests*. On the other hand, the first component of extrinsic motivations covers "social motivations". Cooperators prefer to work in a *less capital-intensive economic model* in order to *contribute more to society and local development*. In addition, the cooperatives' members highly appreciate *being involved in the decision-making process* in order to have a real influence on collective decisions, which gives them a better sense of control over their own future. The second extrinsic component refers to "working conditions". The *lack of hierarchy* in the organisation is viewed positively, with *better working conditions* overall. Thirdly, the "economic components" can motivate cooperators through the *allocation of initial capital to more than one person*, *public funding* and *avoidance of insurance contributions*. Finally, according to the study, this type of organisations is also seen by cooperators as a provider of *job rehabilitation*, which can be considered as the "gaining employment" motivation (Goussia-Rizou & al. 2016, p.13).

In 2004, Birchall and Simmons developed a Mutual Incentives Theory (MIT), which they believe represents a synthesis of existing sociological and political theory. According to this theory, there are two approaches to developing motivation to participate: the individualistic approach and the collectivist approach.

The individualistic approach is presented in two parts. On the one hand, there are positive motivations; individuals are encouraged to participate as they will directly benefit from their

participation. Also, out of habit involvement in social activities helps to get involved in cooperatives. On the other hand, two negative motivations have to be considered, which lead to not participating in cooperation. First, the opportunity cost of participation may seem too high in relation to the potential benefit. Secondly, the real cost of participation, which involves time, travel, etc., is not covered. Free-riding is a form of behaviour that may result from negative motivations; it consists of gaining benefit without being involved at the same level as other members of the group. This approach assumes that participants' behaviour is guided either by individual rewards or by punishments.

The collectivist approach is based on theories of social cooperation and assumes that three variables guide individuals to participate. First, the common objective that drives individuals to participate lies in mutual need. Second, the need to participate can be driven by the values individuals share. Finally, the sense of community indicates that individuals with similar standards of living and those living in the same community or region tend to identify with others and care about their welfare. The stronger these three variables are, the more likely these individuals will be to participate.

Finally, Birchall and Simmons introduce "the participation chain", a model that complements the Mutual Incentives Theory to describe individuals' motivations to participate. This model is composed of three levels. The first level covers the resources that participants have, which includes the time, money and varied skills (bringing expertise to own work's field) available to get involved. This factor helps to find out whose individuals become active. The second level discusses participants' mobilization. The authors mention that some participants are more involved in key issues than non-participants. These questions deal with topics such as negative relationships with the organisation, changes in the cooperative or the sense of relative deprivation (perceived injustice in other words). The study also highlights the importance of inviting potential members to participate; even more so when the recruiter is known to the participant. Then, the third level concerns motivations, which was already presented in the theory of mutual incentives. Although they are considered as to be a chain, these three levels of factors all act independently in influencing member's participation and can vary in terms of intensity. As these factors can change and therefore affect the links' strength of the chain, steps taken to enhance members' participation should ensure to avoid having weak links (Birchall, Simmons, 2004).

In conclusion, there are several motivations explaining cooperators' involvements. The theory and model developed by Birchall and Simmons (2004) helps us to better understand the motivation process and therefore consider cooperators' involvement more accurately. We will likewise keep in mind that voluntary cooperative behaviour can rather be explained by social motivations than by instrumental variables such as incentives or sanctions (Tyler, 2010).

3.2. Cooperative governance

Governance is a key element in the proper functioning of cooperatives. A flat and democratically controlled structure appears to be essential to involve cooperators as much as possible in the decision-making process. A fair and democratic governance ensures that individuals are protected and it prevents that a few make decisions for all. This leads to defining roles to distinguish the responsibilities and establishing the Board of Directors' election process so that everyone can stand for election. To achieve this, good communication within the cooperative is key (Cooperantics coop Website, s.d.).

According to the International Social Economy Review (Moulin, Sadi, 2014), cooperatives governance is a complex subject because of the multiple currents of thought and governance issues specific to the different forms of organisations. The authors also point out that the practice reveals dysfunctions and harmful abuses for stakeholders. The solutions proposed by traditional firms, mainly listed firms, cannot be applied in the case of cooperatives. Governance in this kind of enterprises is indeed often less participative and more hierarchical. These governance solutions very rarely work in such a specific context where cooperatives' values and principles highly differ from those of traditional companies. Governance in traditional firms, listed on the stock exchange for example, does not have the same purpose neither does offer similar practices as cooperatives; governance with a financial purpose will not systematically apply to people-oriented organisations.

Therefore, Moulin and Sadi (2014) mobilizes three theories to build cooperatives' governance foundations based on their complementarities (*see Appendix 1*). First, the theory of the "**psychological contract**" is a mental model that explains the relation between cooperators to cooperatives with a socio-emotional connection. This connection has a positive impact on cooperators' behaviour and interactions. Then, the theory of the "**social contract**", enriched by the "psychological contract", organizes the relationship between cooperators and leaders; a relational contract binding cooperators and managers. And third, the theory of "**stewardship**" describes the profile, role and beliefs of the leader (i.e. the steward), that form a whole belief

system together with the cooperative mental model and indirectly, with the behavioural norms of the social contract (Moulin, Sadi, 2014).

More specifically, the governance challenge faced by multi-stakeholder cooperatives is to take into account cooperators' varied interests and bring them together into a common purpose. The board of directors will act as an arbitrator in order to promote the collective interest among the different categories of stakeholders while avoiding any power games (Compain, 2017).

After looking deeply into theoretical aspects of cooperative governance, the functioning of the cooperative can be concretely analysed by looking at certain aspects such as the entry of new members, the distribution of dividends and cooperators' responsibilities at the general meeting and in the voting process.

With regards to the arrival of new cooperators, cooperatives refer, in their by-laws, to third parties who have the possibility to join the cooperative. This designation may be in nominal form or by category of persons.

The cooperative's by-laws also include a reference to dividends. Either cooperatives decide not to pay dividends to cooperators at all or the by-laws provide for a dividend payment of a certain percentage, also defined in the articles. Nevertheless, this does not imply that each year cooperators will receive a dividend; they are paid out only in case of profit and in the event of a vote in this direction at the general meeting.

General meetings must take place at least once a year and deal with subjects such as *"the approval of the annual accounts and the management report, the approval of the provisional budget for the current financial year, the discharge of directors or the potential appointment or resignation of directors if this is the case"* (SAW B, 2015, p. 9). Any vote taking place during the general meeting requires a simple majority unless the cooperative's by-laws say otherwise. The cooperators' voting power also depends on the cooperative's by-laws. In most cases, each cooperator has a single vote, regardless of the number of shares owned while in some cases, one share is equivalent to one vote. However, in order to prevent abuses, a rule states that *"no one may participate in the vote for a number of votes exceeding one tenth of the votes attached to the total share represented at the general meeting"* (SAW B, 2015, p. 9).

In a nutshell, this section allows us to understand better the specific rules applied in cooperatives to manage the decision-making process. We keep in mind that cooperative

governance, especially in those where there are different types of cooperators, is complex and must be carefully organised in order to ensure the proper functioning of the organisation.

4. State of play and introduction to the empirical research

In conclusion, this first section allowed us to discuss the current context of stakeholder involvement and governance in organisations. Then, we moved on to the characteristics of companies organised in the form of cooperatives and set out their functioning and mission. Finally, we immersed ourselves in the cooperators' involvement to better understand their motivations and the ways in which they can get involved. Based on these elements, we can draw up a state of play of the subject and its limits, justifying the empirical research.

The first chapter on stakeholder involvement pointed out the importance of managing and involving stakeholders in organisations. While Smith and Woods (2015) highlight identity, governance and legitimacy as key aspects to gain support from stakeholders, Beronne et al (2012) promote a normative approach of stakeholders' management as creating value for all should be the right thing to do. We also reviewed the key principles of stakeholders' management, which put a focus on communicating and building trust relationships (MacNicol, Griffin, Mansell, 2014). Then, we clarified the notion of governance - the way companies are managed and controlled - and the importance of respecting the organisations' values, transparency in decision-making process as well as the relationship with stakeholders (SPF Economie, 2018). This section helps to consider, in a pragmatic way, the specific challenges and opportunities in cooperatives.

The second chapter aimed to describe the values, principles and characteristics of this form of organisation. As part of the social economy, such democratic enterprise focusing on its members and guided by values rather than profit intend to create jobs and sustain business activities in the long run (SPF Economie, 2018 ; International Co-operative Alliance Official Website, 2018 ; Dufays, 2018). The definition of ICA (2015) puts the focus on the fact that cooperators act collectively to achieve a common mission, being the users and owners of the cooperative. Cooperatives are organised around the non-binding principles of voluntary and open membership, democratic control, economic participation of members, autonomy and independence, education, training and information, and concern for the community (International Co-operative Alliance, 2015 ; Krivokapic-Skoko, Oczkowski, Plummer, 2013).

The values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity guide cooperatives members (Somerville, 2007). Those principles and values can however be applied differently depending on the type of cooperatives; i.e. producer, worker, consumer/user or stakeholders cooperatives. The latter, gathering several types of cooperators, will be the subject of the empirical research.

The third chapter on cooperators' involvement gave an overview on members' motivations to involve as well as on how cooperative governance operates. Goussia-Rizou, Giannouli and Makris and Sdrali (2016) identified intrinsic motivations, social motivations, working conditions, economic components and gain of employment as the main drivers of cooperators' involvement. The theory of Birchall and Simmons (2004) highlights, on the one hand, the benefits and habit as individualistic motivations while costs, opportunity costs and satiation counterbalance positive drivers. On the other hand and from a collectivist approach, the sense of community as well as shared goals and values form the main motivations for cooperators participation. In addition, their model identifies the available resources, mobilization and motivations as three factors influencing participation in cooperatives (Birchall, Simmons, 2004). Understanding those motivations is key to consider cooperators' involvement more accurately. Governance and members' involvement in management and control of the cooperatives were also discussed as it forms a crucial element of its functioning. Moulin and Sadi (2014) point out the complexity and the specificity of cooperative governance, guided by fairness and democracy, as they grow in a different environment than traditional companies. In multi-stakeholder cooperative, the challenge lies in converging the interests of the variety of cooperators into a common purpose. We finally see the specific rules that can be applied in specific context in terms of governance.

This leads us to the subject of the empirical research: understanding the practices of members' involvement, with the focus put on multi-stakeholder cooperatives. The challenge faced by these cooperatives is even bigger considering that they gather several types of stakeholders, with divergent interests. In addition, very little information is available in literature to identify what are the best practices and ways to involve members in cooperatives dealing with different types of cooperators. The theoretical part offers key elements to understand cooperators involvement and the purpose is now to try and identify what is concretely put in place in these cooperatives.

Empirical Part

1. Methodology of the qualitative research

The research question addressed in this thesis leads us to adopt an exploratory approach. Our objective is not to test previously developed hypotheses, but rather to report on the techniques and approach to stakeholders' involvement in cooperatives to date. To achieve this, a qualitative research using semi-structured interviews based on an interview guide will be conducted. This method of interviewing allows to ask a number of questions in order to open the discussions without narrowing too much the scope (Fox, N., Hunn, A., Mathers, N., 2002). The use of a quantitative questionnaire did not appear to be appropriate due to the fact that it would not enable open dialogue which is especially valuable in order to learn about the cooperatives' practices. The responses would have been limited to subjects selected in advance, with no flexibility for adjustment and therefore imposing the researcher's framework to interviewees and on results as well as running the risk of missing part of the complexity of cooperatives' reality.

To do this, we started by listing a large number of cooperatives; they were included in the selection either because they were familiar organisations or thanks to word of mouth. An analysis of each company's by-laws was then carried out in order to identify the multi-stakeholder cooperatives. The cooperatives fulfilling the criteria and corresponding to the subject of the research were contacted to request an interview with either a director or a permanent worker of the cooperative. Therefore, 14 cooperatives were contacted and 7 of them accepted to give me an interview. The six main themes to be covered in the interview were already mentioned at this point. An interview guide was prepared (*see Appendix 2*) to ensure that all interviews run as smoothly and consistently as possible and to allow systematic comparison between interviews (Steils, 2018). The interview guide includes a series of questions based on the six main themes to be raised. This includes the reasons that led to the choice of the legal form of cooperative, the position that cooperators occupy in the cooperative's governance (roles, implications, participation arrangements), the management of cooperators' diversity (rights, obligations, implications and reasons for differentiation), the evolution of members' involvement since the creation, the good practices associated with cooperators' involvement and, finally, examples illustrating situations which show unsuccessful cooperators' involvement.

The interviews were conducted with funders, administrators or worker cooperators from the seven organisations who agreed to be part of the research. Although we use a convenience-based sampling method, it covers cooperatives operating in six different sectors of activity (such as construction, agriculture, delivery, journalism, food and services) and of different sizes, ranging from 90 to 20,000 cooperators (Neergaard, 2007). This diversity enabled us to shed light on a wide variety of practices. The interviews were conducted in French for the convenience of the interviewees. In order to ensure that the meaning and nuances of the respondents' comments are preserved, the excerpts from the interview that will be included in the analysis will be in French. The purpose of the present thesis is to study best practices in terms of members' involvement from a director or a permanent worker perspective instead of from a cooperator standpoint. Finally, each interview was recorded and transcribed (*see Appendices 3 to 9*) in order to ensure the accuracy of the analysis.

Then, in order to simplify the analysis and allow cooperatives to be compared, a double entry table was created with, on the one hand, the important themes addressed (identified thanks to the literature, the interview guide and recurring matters from the interviews) and, on the other hand, the cooperatives interviewed. These themes were developed on the basis of a thematic coding with some themes that were an intuition from the theories and were confirmed by the thematic coding as well as some new themes also emerged from these interviews (Saldaña, 2009 ; Skjott Linneberg, & Korsgaard, 2019). For the sake of accuracy, each cooperative was requested to provide the business status documents, which were used to further detail the information already available. Thanks to the table, the comparison of the themes is made easier and helps to highlight shared or opposite mechanisms.

2. Analysed cooperative at a glance

Before starting with the analysis of cooperatives, their mission should be introduced in order to gain a better understanding of their structure. The selected cooperatives are of different sizes and operate in various sectors, which enriches the analysis carried out and allows to better appreciate the challenges they face given their specificities. The scope of the selection has been limited to seven cooperatives in order to make a detailed analysis. It was also assumed that the sample is varied and large enough to achieve a tangible outcome.

Paille-Tech

Paille-Tech developed an innovative technical process for house building. In order to deal with environmental, energy and health concerns, the cooperative uses frames and insulation made of natural, sustainable and local materials: wood, straw bales and raw earth. The information used in the present thesis is originating from the official website (Paille-Tech SCRL, 2019a), the interview with the Executive director, the transcript being available in *Appendix 3*, and the by-laws (Paille-Tech SCRL, 2019b).

Coopérative des Betteraviers Transformateurs, CoBT

The Beetroot Processors Cooperative, CoBT for short, is active in the production, manufacturing, processing into sugar, valorisation and trade operations of beetroot in Belgium and neighbouring countries in order to offer direct or indirect advantages to its cooperators. The cooperative mainly aims at offering growers a fair remuneration for the beetroot supplied. The information used comes from various sources: the official website (Coopérative des Betteraviers Transformateurs SCRL, s.d.), the discussion with the cooperative's coordinator, a copy of which is available in *Appendix 4*, and the by-laws (Coopérative des Betteraviers Transformateurs SCRL, 2018).

Urbike

Urbike is an actor of the change in urban logistics by promoting, through various projects, the shift of truck delivery towards a bicycle solution to reduce heavy and polluting transport in large cities. The cooperative uses trailers, allowing to convey larger quantities of goods compared to bicycles, with the opportunity to arrange deliveries by organising the trailers according to the delivery route. The project forms part of the Inoviris Smart mobility challenge. The information comes from the cooperative's website (Urbike SCRL, 2018a), the transcript of the interview with the CEO and co-creator available in *Appendix 5* and the by-laws (Urbike SCRL, 2018b).

Médor

Médor is a journalistic cooperative set up by 19 actors (journalists, graphic designers, etc.) who aspires to do "real" journalism by taking the time to conduct "real" investigations; this is the reason why it is published quarterly. The idea was to create an independent newspaper that is not funded through commercial advertising and that meets the values advocated by

journalism; namely transparency, independence and solidarity. Also, there is less internal competition than in traditional newspapers as the chief editor is assigned each quarter to a different journalist. The cooperative website (Médor SCRL à finalité sociale, s.d), the transcript of the interview with the cooperative's coordinator available in *Appendix 6* and the by-laws (Médor SCRL à finalité sociale, 2014) are the main sources of information.

Färm.LLN

Färm.LLN focuses on sustainable food and is owned by its customers, employees, producers and financial investors. The cooperative's goal is to offer to the widest possible number of people access to quality, healthy and sustainable food products. The cooperative's vision is to raise awareness and change the relationship between food and people in order to improve relationships between individuals. In this thesis, we made use of information available on the website (Färm.LLN SCRL, s.d.), from the interview with the administrator, which is available in *Appendix 7*, and in the statutes (Färm.LLN SCRL, 2017).

SMartCoop

At the beginning, SMartCoop was a Belgian non-profit organisation named SMart. It was set up in 1997 and aimed at helping self-employed and intermittent workers from arts and creative sectors in their daily struggles. In 2015, the non-profit association was transformed into a cooperative under the name of SMartCoop, which is a non-profit collective company that offers social protection to its employees while enjoying the freedom of a self-employed. Over time it became a community of nearly 100,000 cooperators in 9 European countries. The information used in the present thesis is originating from the official website (SMartCoop SCRL à finalité sociale, s.d.), the interview with two persons in charge of the Cooperative Life, the transcript being available in *Appendix 8*, and the by-laws (SMartCoop SCRL à finalité sociale, 2017).

Macavrac

Macavrac is a cooperative, participative and socially-oriented grocery store whose main goal is to offer local products while ensuring a fair remuneration for producers. The cooperative is keen on avoiding unnecessary packaging, relying on producers located as locally as possible and offering mostly organic and ethical goods at a fair price, in respect for small producers. The information comes from the cooperative's website (Macavrac SCRL à finalité sociale,

2019), the transcript of the interview with the co-coordinator available in *Appendix 9*, and the by-laws (Macavrac SCRL à finalité sociale, 2018).

3. Results

To ease the analysis of the interviews, a double entry table was created; with, in the columns, the cooperatives interviewed and, in the rows, the key and common themes raised during the interviews. Prior to getting started, there has been a great deal of thoughts on the approach and the main topics to be discussed with the interviewees which helped to create the structure of the conversations (*see Interview Guide in Appendix 2*), but, after the interviews and during the analysis, some additional recurring subjects and mechanisms could be added.

The first four themes (Sector of activity, Year of creation, Size of the cooperative and Types of cooperators and shares) mainly help to provide a global understanding of the cooperative structure and its cooperators while the fifth topic helps to understand the reasons that drive cooperatives to differentiate their stakeholders (Multi-stakeholder cooperative: Reasons for differentiation). Then, a sixth theme addresses the reasons that led the founders to choose the legal form of a cooperative (Reason for choosing the legal form of cooperative).

Next, we analysed the cooperatives' main decision-making bodies; on the one hand, how they are organised ((Governance (Board of Directors), General Assembly:) and, on the other hand, the structure and application of voting rights (General Assembly: Voting rights). Another theme was added to the initial scheme (Other decision-making places) due to the fact that five cooperatives out of seven have set up additional decision-making bodies, for reasons related to their own configuration.

Finally, three themes are related to the mechanisms of direct and indirect involvement of cooperators (Mechanisms of involvement to be promoted, Less successful involvement mechanisms and Mechanisms to be put in place in the future). The first two cover positive as well as negative practices and experiences of cooperators' involvement. The third one covers the mechanisms to be developed in the future with view to ensuring a better organisation. In addition, when the topic of stakeholder involvement was tackled in the interviews, five of them mentioned the use of working groups in order to involve their cooperators or stakeholders (Working groups).

3.1. Comparative table

	Paille-Tech	Coopérative des Betteraviers Transformateurs, CoBT	Urbike	Médor
Sector of activity	Construction	Agriculture	Delivery	Journalism
Year of creation	2009	2018	2018	2014
Size of the cooperative	90 cooperators, including 14 workers	1,400 cooperators	200 cooperators	950 cooperators
Types of cooperators and shares	Shares A are reserved for employees of the company or former employees; they are the only ones who can buy them (1120 shares A in total). And shares C are for cooperators (4822 shares including 1884 of Sowecsom, a financial partner in social and cooperative economy projects).	Beetroot transformers have access to shares A, shares B are for the beetroot suppliers, shares S are reserved for the sympathizers and finally, institutional or strategic investors can get shares F.	Shares A are for guarantors and founders only, shares B are reserved for employees, partners customers and suppliers can get shares C, shares D are for supporters who adhere to the philosophy or value of the project and finally, shares E are for institutional investors.	Shares C are for cooperators (20 euros) and shares F are reserved to founders (160 euros).
Multi-stakeholder	The dimension of risk is taken into account; some	The main reason for differentiation is that	The main reason for differentiation is that	The main reason for differentiation is that no

cooperative: Reasons for differentiation	cooperators invest more money than others and are therefore more subject to risk. The management thinks it is reasonable that the right to make decisions is proportional to the risks taken. Shares A cost 123 euros while shares C cost 184 euros.	cooperators have different interests. In addition, to have access to shares B, cooperators must be able to supply at least 100 tons of beetroots.	cooperators have different interests. The cooperative is willing that couriers are able to have decent work conditions.	other press organism could ever acquire a large number of shares. As a result, the founders will always be able to protect the cooperative's interests at the General Assembly and its corporate purpose.
Reason for choosing the legal form of cooperative	The cooperative brings participative dynamics and makes it possible to obtain much better results when people are concerned about the decisions that are made.	The cooperative's objective is to offer beetroot growers the best possible remuneration for their produce. Another reason is to offer the cooperators maximum transparency as well as simple and effective governance and to ensure a direct link between raw material suppliers and the beneficiaries of the processed	The main reason is to ensure quality of service; if Urbike wants to keep couriers motivated, they must motivate them well. Motivation can be achieved by feeling heard, involved, respected and well paid, with guarantees and insurance. Having their say in the company	The founders wanted to have quarterly releases to have the opportunity to have enough time to conduct surveys. They were in favor of a business model that corresponds to the values they defend for the media, which were transparency, independence and solidarity. According to

		products.	also helps. The cooperative model was also an important financial choice; the cooperatives' investors are considered as guarantors and no external parties will be able to acquire all the shares and change the company.	the founders, only the cooperative model could answer this.
Governance (Board of Directors)	The Board of Directors is composed of a minimum of three and a maximum of nine directors, each elected by the General Assembly. For the time being, there are four of them are cooperative workers, two are non-working cooperators. It is however the four workers who will always have the last word. At the Board of	The Board of Directors is composed of at least 60% of cooperators A and B and also at least one representative of financial cooperators (type F).	The cooperative is managed by at least three directors, whether or not they are partners, who are then appointed by the General Assembly for a fixed or indefinite period but may be dismissed at any time by the General Assembly. At least two members shall be appointed by the	In the Board of Directors, there are four founders, who are also cooperators, as well as three individuals from the 950 cooperators. It is necessary to always have 51% of seats allocated to the founding members in order to guarantee the cooperative's social purpose. These are two-year terms, renewable

	Directors, votes are conducted in accordance with the one-person one-vote rule. The cooperative has indicated in its by-laws that the people active, employees and worker cooperators in the company, had to have a majority on the Board of Directors.		General Assembly of shareholders from among the cooperators of A shares.	twice.
General Assembly:	At the General Assembly, the cooperative chose to honour the investments; they can have another decision-making process. The logic behind decisions and power not being totally identical makes the difference with structures such as public limited companies where those holding the shares will appoint management.	There are seven local sections, regional cooperation circles, of the General Assembly who elect delegates. Each local section may elect one delegate for every thirty partners. As a result, when the General Assembly meeting takes place, it will only include those delegates. Until now, they are forty-eight of them plus the financial partners who	The General Assembly is composed of all shareholders who have the right to vote, either by themselves or by a representative. The deliberations taken by the General Assembly are binding for all, even for absent or dissenting partners.	It is a bicameral cooperative; each chamber is composed of a type of cooperators. On the one hand, we find the 19 founders of the cooperative and, on the other hand, the cooperators.

		represent themselves for their personal investment. This structure allows more constructive decisions and less travel.		
General Assembly: Voting rights	One share equals one vote.	In the context of the regional General Assembly, the right to vote considers that each partner has one vote. The larger General Assembly, including the delegates, however considers that each share represents one vote.	Each partner represents one vote, regardless of the class which they belong to and of the number of shares held.	The decisions of the General Assembly concerning the budget or strategic decisions must always be taken by a majority of both chambers, i.e. by a majority of the founders but also by a majority of the cooperators. This process allows the founders to always remain guarantors of the corporate purpose. The cooperative considers that each cooperator represents one vote.

Other decision-making places	The cooperative includes a third decision-making body, the assembly of worker cooperators. This assembly is autonomous in its decisions regarding the planning and composition of the teams, the material of the workshop and work sites, the policy of purchasing materials, equipment and tools, the evaluation of the functioning of the teams and continuous improvement and the recruitment of subcontractors, trainees, aspirants or cooperative workers.	There is a local section of the General Assembly by region, the meeting takes place before the main General Assembly.	There is a college of guarantors which approves the admission of new shares A cooperators or the exclusion of a cooperator holding shares A by a simple majority of the voters, present or represented.	There is no other decision-making place for the moment.
Mechanisms of involvement to be promoted	The cooperative organizes team meetings once a month for half a day to discuss the	The cooperative needs to think about the structure from the beginning so that it	It is not yet applicable in this cooperative. Due to the small size of the	The cooperative has a broader vision of involvement because it does

	agenda and a round table where everyone can have a say. Where applicable, some cooperators are responsible for coming up with solutions or ideas for the next meeting. According to the Managing Director, two things are essential in proper cooperators' involvement; on the one hand, effective communication and, on the other hand, to have a place where everyone is treated equally, i.e. having the same weight in the decision-making process and ensuring a low salary difference.	corresponds to its social purpose. It is necessary to be as transparent as possible with the cooperators and to train future partners, delegates and directors so that they have everything they require to take full responsibility in their future role. The company has put guidelines in place in order to ensure that farmers are always in control of both capital and governance.	structure, the founders fear that the time spent on the cooperators' implication would exceed the benefits. For the moment, they feel that the cooperators are rather there for the financial aspects and are in a position of observers and motivators, which leads them to being ambassadors, as they bring new customers on board.	not only focus on cooperators' involvement but rather on stakeholders in the broadest sense; the involvement of both cooperators and readers who do not necessarily have a share in the cooperative. Some stakeholders are more involved than others by nature. Cooperators will be greatly involved in the development of the cooperative while readers will be more focused on the content. A major difference also lies in the participation of cooperators in the General Assembly and Board of Directors.
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				The cooperative tries to be as transparent as possible by using newsletters to inform cooperators, subscribers and founders.
Working groups	The cooperative tries to make working groups, involving only cooperators who are not employees, to discuss the new by-laws and the implications of being a cooperative. This helps to sustain a positive environment around the cooperative and eventually bring in new contracts and customers.	There are plans to involve cooperators in working groups and in advisory bodies, with view to discussing beetroot purchasing arrangements, etc.	That doesn't really apply yet. However, the cooperative thinks that the way forward is to set up punctual working groups with a clear mission; avoiding time-consuming gatherings, as the risk of cooperators dropping out at a certain point is high.	The cooperative organizes workshops for all cooperators to discuss the strategic development. They also offer round tables to readers, in order to help and develop the project; the "Médor tour" represents this decentralization of the editorial staff, a Web platform. The round tables also aim at analysing the type of participation they target (for instance, the involvement of all stakeholders in the broad

				sense) but also at debriefing the ideas that have already been put in place.
Less successful involvement mechanisms	At the very beginning, the cooperative operated with meetings where everyone takes on the role of business leader. But this model, where everyone gets to decide and the roles are not specified, did not work. The meetings appeared not to be constructive but also never-ending.	As the cooperative is still in the early stages of development, they can only provide an example of a French cooperative acting in the same sector that suffered from major problems of interaction at the governance level between the Board of Directors and the operational team. The Board of Directors and the Executive Committee were unable to work together.	It is not yet applicable in this cooperative.	In collaboration with SAW-B (a pluralist federation of social economy), the cooperative initiated meetings with cooperators to get an understanding of the areas they wanted to get involved in. It was found that promotion was the main activity. They have tried to put it together, but only two individuals were available internally to manage the process; it appeared that they didn't have enough time to support the cooperators and it has been a failure.

				Involvement is not self-sufficient.
Mechanisms to be put in place in the future	The cooperative needs to better define everyone's roles and when it is appropriate for individuals to give their opinion.	Ensure that there is always an efficient communication in the governance bodies, between the Board of Directors and the Executive Committee.	The cooperative does not involve its cooperators yet.	According to the coordinator of Médor, participation is not self-sufficient; they would like to have a full-time person to lead the community, but they cannot afford it financially for the moment. They want to get as close as possible to their audience to better involve them.

	Färm.LLN	SMartCoop	Macavrac
Sector of activity	Food	Services - Support for self-employed workers	Food
Year of creation	2017	ASBL : 1997, Cooperative : 2015	2018
Size of the cooperative	350 cooperators	20,000 cooperators in Belgium	290 cooperators
Types of cooperators and shares	Shares A are for developers, shares B are for managers, shares C are for employees, shares D are for supporters, shares E are for students and shares F are for suppliers.	Shares A includes members who wish to start or continue an economic activity via the tools reserved for them by the company or the Smart group and shares B include exclusively all members who are not or no longer members of category A. The capital contribution required is a share of the company, except for members admitted to category A, whose required capital contribution is one share per calendar year.	Shares A are reserved for founders, shares B are for the consumers and project actors, shares C are for the producers, shares D are for the sympathizers and finally, shares E are for the investors.
Multi-stakeholder	The purpose of using this model is to be able to involve the different actors	Being a multi-stakeholder cooperative is essential to SMartCoop in terms of	The main reason for differentiation is that some individuals want to operationally

cooperative: Reasons for differentiation	in the trade value chain and other types of cooperators in different ways.	finding the right balance and power relations so that they do not reproduce a wage pattern.	help the cooperative while others do not necessarily have the time to get involved but want to support the project financially.
Reason for choosing the legal form of cooperative	The company's mission is to create an efficient, user-friendly and fair cooperation between all actors in the food chain in order to provide as many people as possible with access to sustainable, healthy and high- quality food. Sustainable food is clean, organic, healthy, ethical, tasty food, accessible to as many people as possible, both in terms of price and proximity, and which allows all the actors in the chain to build themselves.	Smart has gone from an ASBL to a cooperative as part of a participatory and democratic process that involved taking opinions, consultations and concerted actions from its community of members.	Macavrac's objective is to be a democratic company, to offer the right of scrutiny and the right to have a say about the products being sold, how to source them and to do that as a community.
Governance (Board of Directors)	The General Assembly chooses directors from lists submitted by the cooperators of categories A, B, C, D, E and F. Each category of cooperators	The Board of Directors is composed of a minimum of seven and a maximum of seventeen cooperating members, who are elected by secret ballot and a	All directors must necessarily be cooperators and are appointed by the General Assembly. At least two thirds of the directors must be from category A

	is entitled to have a Director appointed provided that the person owns at least one share and this, regardless of the total number of shares that person has. In addition, as of 20% of the total shares, each class of cooperators has the right to have one Director nominated for each intermediate bucket of 20% of the total votes it holds, up to a maximum of four directors per class. These are four-year terms, which are renewable.	majority of the votes cast by the General Assembly. The Board of Directors must be composed of at least 40% female and 40% male Directors. In addition, three fifths of the directors must come from category A. Sometimes, the cooperative creates colleges or categories that have voting weights to avoid that enrichment by all stakeholders ends up giving too much weight to a particular category.	cooperators, with a view to always protecting the corporate purpose.
General Assembly:	The General Assembly is composed of the 350 cooperators, among which Olivier Van Cauwelaert who represents the financial partners, and also the manager of the cooperative.	At the General Assembly meeting, the directors answer questions from the shareholders. The General Assembly of Shareholders may only take decisions on the matters provided for in the agenda. During the General Assembly, working groups are formed to reflect on certain topics that require discussions.	The General Assembly is composed of all shareholders as well as the management of the cooperative.

		In 2019, to represent the fact that the cooperative has been sharing its resources for a few years, SMartCoop held a common General Assembly (FrancoBelgium), since there were two legal General Assemblies in each country.	
General Assembly: Voting rights	One share equals one vote.	At the General Assembly, all decisions are taken by a simple majority of votes. Each cooperator has one vote.	All shares owners have the right to participate in the General Assembly. Each of them represents one vote.
Other decision-making places	In order to ensure that the opinion of non-financial cooperators is represented, and not only that of financial investors, the cooperative organizes a two-stage meeting with the college of sympathizers first, without the financiers, so that non-financial cooperators can have a voice in the decision-making process.	There is no other decision-making place for the moment.	There is a Board of Directors but the steering committee makes most of the decisions. This committee is composed of the extended Board of Directors and looks at the future in order to ensure the profitability of the cooperative.
Mechanisms of	According to the administrator, it is	Being multi-channel is important as not	The cooperative tries to be as inclusive

involvement to be promoted	important to have delegates elected who represent categories of cooperators in order to encourage more constructive debates when there are many cooperators.	everyone has the same amount of time to get involved. These individuals can however get involved in more specific areas or in areas where more time was spent. The cooperative also tries to ensure that members organize information sessions, train others on the tools they know well and support individuals in the development of economic activity sectors they are familiar with.	and transparent as possible and wants to ensure that meeting attendance does not become a burden.
Working groups	Being involved in a committee means co-constructing Färm around a specific theme. A committee is an independent group of "co-färms" who take ownership of its scope of actions in collaboration with the employees and the Board of Directors. Coordination with the other committees is also essential. There are ten different committees for	Between two General Assembly meetings, the working groups consult on a number of subjects, submit their recommendations to the Board of Directors (in April), who then presents them at the General Assembly, which finally ratifies. "Smart in progress" is the participatory approach that encourages the cooperators community to animate sharing of opinions,	For cooperators who wish to get further involved, ten working groups are organized, each dealing with a specific topic.

	cooperators to be involved in: communication, brand, cooperative life, auditing accounts, values, gourmet, impact, societal, student and administrative committees. The cooperative also offers round tables for cooperators to find solutions to existing issues. For example, one topic under consideration is home delivery.	consultations and concerted actions. Then it is up to the permanent team to set this up during the following period. There is also the school of cooperation where groups of stakeholders gather around a theme to produce recommendations, after working together for a few months. These recommendations are presented to the governance bodies that will eventually decide.	
Less successful involvement mechanisms	The cooperative finds that there is a lack of communication and transparency. Some important topics, such as why they are organized in a cooperative, what suppliers offer and what is the logic behind prices in store, should be discussed more often.	The cooperative noticed a lack of explanation around the cooperative principle. They also realized that the concept of membership was not clear to all which creates some confusion. Some individuals also think that, because they are a cooperative, they can give their opinion on any subject at any time. Therefore, it is imperative to remind and explain the concept and its	On the one hand, the cooperative noticed that some cooperators are not very involved. They then feel the need to challenge these individuals to understand their initial motivations. On the other hand, the cooperative faces cooperators who give too much time. There is a risk that they get highly involved for several months in a row but then end up exhausted and take distance from the

		principles, in order to avoid any misunderstanding.	project. It can be difficult for people coming to the store to understand the mechanisms behind the scenes. They feel it is important to be more transparent and inclusive with cooperators at this level and also to ensure that volunteers do not feel reluctance.
Mechanisms to be put in place in the future	With extra human and financial resources, Färm would like to have a website and create a newsletter in order to improve communication, inform the cooperators and answer their questions. The cooperative is willing to hire a person who looks after the cooperators and social networks, still with a view to improving communication.	The cooperative has noticed a lack of resources in the monthly working groups, due to a shortage of human resources. The groups' sessions should be available in multiple languages, over variable periods of time and in several areas, not only in Brussels, in order to maintain a certain scale.	The cooperative would like to set up a guide book to help existing groups with welcoming new members and cooperators.

As highlighted in the comparative table, the sample of cooperatives is composed of varied-size structures and life cycle's stages, across different sectors. Some features of member involvement are common to all cooperatives while number of them must be adapted to the specificities (i.e. size and sector of activity) of each cooperative. This is discussed in the following section.

3.2. Understanding the choice of multi-stakeholder cooperative's structure

Multi-stakeholder cooperatives involve **several types of cooperators**, depending on their project and activity. The types of cooperators observed in the cooperatives that were interviewed are as follows: founders, consumers, employees, workers, financial investors, institutional investors, supporters, suppliers, managers, students and producers. The **reasons for differentiating** the types of cooperators mentioned in the interviews are of various natures.¹ First of all, the categories of cooperators show different interests that could be better represented and taken into account when they are differentiated. Secondly, this model seems essential in terms of finding the right balance and power relations in order to keep a certain level of democracy; the company being not solely run by an employer. Thirdly, the level of involvement can differ; which is why some cooperatives offer shares in order to either create the opportunity to take concrete actions or simply support the project financially because they hold to the values but do not have the chance to get involved in a more practical and effective manner. Finally, differentiating cooperators makes it possible to promote the potential contributions depending on the roles. For example, Färm involves its actors in the trade value chain while other types of cooperators get involved in a different way. It is important to note, however, that a multi-stakeholder model requires specific attention to the mechanisms of involvement in the governance, in the day-to-day activities and in thinking about the future.

¹ Anne-Laure Desgris: « *Le fait d'être en multi partie prenante pour moi c'est essentiel aussi dans les équilibres et les rapports de force, pour ne pas reproduire un patronat salarial.* » (Interview SmartCoop – Appendix 8)

The cooperatives being analysed have naturally chosen to organize in a multi-stakeholder model. The motivations that led the founders to **choose the legal form of a cooperative** for their activity can be of different kinds. We note that one main reason is to achieve better results by getting members feel involved and motivated. The project being in line with values such as transparency, democracy and fairness are also perceived as incentives. Finally, it is

seen as the best approach towards the achievement of a social mission. On the one hand, the cooperatives being analysed mentioned that this decision was made to take advantage of participative dynamics; according to these actors, better results can be achieved when employees are directly involved in the company's decision-making process. On the other hand, a participative and democratic process consisting of consulting employees, taking into account one's opinions and acting in consultation leads to a higher level of motivation. Cooperators feel heard, involved and respected by having the opportunity to be part of the decisions or being paid fairly. In some cases, this was the only model that corresponded to the values of the cooperative's business project; examples include solidarity, transparency and independence.² Particularly in the food sector, the cooperation promoted between value chain players leads to fair remuneration for producers and quality food for customers.

² Jean-Luc de Wilde: « Ce qui m'a toujours intéressé, et je pense que c'était le cas du fondateur à l'époque, ce sont les dynamiques participatives. Je pense que l'on peut avoir de biens meilleurs résultats dans une entreprise quand les gens sont concernés par les décisions qui sont prises. (...) Toutes les décisions doivent pouvoir être au moins expliquées et préférentiellement débattues, croisées, et pas qu'il y ait juste certains qui décident tout à la place des autres. » (Interview Paille-Tech – Appendix 3)

3.3. Members' involvement in governance and decision-making process

Different ways of operating can be observed, depending on the governance methods and the involvement of cooperators and founders in the decision-making process of the cooperative. In two cooperatives, Médor and Macavrac, the by-laws require to have a majority of founders on the Board of Directors in order to ensure that the social purpose of the cooperative is achieved in all decisions taken. However, by contrast, two other cooperatives, SMartCoop and CoBT, have their statutes requiring that cooperators are represented by a majority on the Board of Directors, precisely so that they hold on to power and have the final say. Next to this, we observe that Paille Tech agreed that the Board of Directors should be mainly composed of active members, namely workers cooperators as well as employees of the cooperative, who must benefit from its success; therefore, workers cooperators always have the last word. Yet another cooperative, Urbike, does not impose a majority of the founders to compose the Board of Directors in its by-laws but simply a minimum of two, having no limit with regards to the involvement of other types of cooperators. For its part, Färm has set up a

system to define the proportion of each type of cooperators present on the Board of Directors according to the number of cooperators who makes up each share. Therefore, each category of cooperators has the right to have one administrator appointed for each intermediate tranche of 20% of the total number of votes it holds within the entire cooperative. This allows a representation on the Board of Directors proportional to the number of cooperators in each category. In another cooperative, SMartCoop, we note that a degree of parity between men and women must be preserved by imposing a minimum presence on the Board of Directors of at least forty percent of each gender. Similarly, SMartCoop stipulates that the Board of Directors must be composed of three fifths of cooperators A, the individuals who benefit from the cooperative's services, so that the cooperative remains theirs as they have a majority in the decision-making process. To avoid enrichment by certain categories of workers, they set up colleges with specific voting weights. Therefore, we observe that the cooperative either choose to distinguish only between founders and all cooperators or set more specific requirements based on the types of cooperators involved in the governance.

We observe that the **General Assemblies** in the cooperatives under analysis have a rather traditional set-up but we also see some specific features such as in the beetroot processing cooperative (CoBT) where the General Assembly is organised in two levels; there are seven local sections and then a larger General Assembly grouping the delegates elected by the local assemblies. Likewise, SMartCoop organises a General Assembly for two countries over two days with a trip between the two cities (Paris and Brussels) but also two legal General Assemblies, respectively in France and in Belgium. It should also be noted that Paille Tech uses a different representation logic at the General Assembly, compared to the one at the Board of Directors. Indeed, the fact that there are different decision-making and power logics between these two organs prevents only those holding all shares can appoint the management body. Finally, Médor is a bicameral cooperative, with two chambers composed of the two types of cooperators; the 19 founders of the cooperative on one side and the cooperators on the other.

Looking at **the right of cooperators to vote at the General Assembly**³, a majority of cooperatives applying the principle of "one man equals one vote" is emerging. This is the absolute principle of the National Cooperative Council. A general observation is that four cooperatives approached practice the right to vote without taking into account the number of shares of each cooperator; all individuals are treated as equals, regardless of their investments.

However, two cooperatives exercise the voting right by accounting for the number of shares. The method applied by the last cooperative differ in the sense that the two basic voting principles (depending on the shares and the person) are combined but at two different levels: the smaller local General Assembly offers each cooperator one vote, regardless of the number of shares, while the General Assembly bringing together the delegates from local sections applies the right to vote based on the number of shares. This process aims not only to favour traditional cooperators but also to increase financial investors' leverage as they account for a larger contribution. The abovementioned criteria try to always promote fairness while taking into account the different levels of risk; the types of shares and contributions arising from the different categories of cooperators should be taken into consideration. The interviewees explained these choices were considered to be the most appropriate according to their own circumstances and emphasized the importance of explaining and sharing decisions in order to maintain good relationships.

³ Laurence Jenard: « Les décisions de l'assemblée générale concernant le budget ou les décisions stratégiques doivent se prendre à la majorité des deux chambres donc il faut la majorité de la part des fondateurs, mais aussi des coopérateurs, cela fait que les fondateurs peuvent rester garants de l'objet social. » (Interview Médor – Appendix 6)

In order to promote the involvement of cooperators in the decision-making process, we observe that most cooperatives have set up **other decision-making forums** to foster more detailed discussions and exchange of ideas on themes pertinent to the cooperative. For example, the “College of guarantors” is a decision-making body at Urbike, which approves the admission or exclusion of A shares' holders (guarantors and founders) by a simple majority of votes of members present in person or represented by proxy. Paille-Tech, for its part, has set up the “Assembly of worker cooperators”, which offers its worker cooperators a great opportunity to take decisions; they have full authority over decisions regarding the workers' organisation and needs on worksites.⁴ This includes the organisation of work schedules, the purchase of construction equipment and the recruitment of external workers. With view to more traditional decision-making bodies, we observe that CoBT has established local sections of the General Assembly in order to make the debates more interactive and meaningful in smaller committees. Macavrac finally has created the “Piloting committee”, which is composed of the extended Board of Directors, bringing together the cooperators of

each group and the founding members, has a larger scope than the Board of Directors alone and analyses the cooperative's future with the aim of ensuring profitability. At Färm, where the "one share equals one vote" principle applies, the cooperative deployed a two-step process where the "College of sympathisers" meet without financial investors first, in order to ensure the representation of non-financial cooperators' opinions.

⁴ Jean-Luc de Wilde: « On a créé un troisième lieu de décisions qui est l'assemblée des coopérateurs travailleurs qui est responsable d'un certain nombre de décisions notamment de la composition de l'équipe, du choix des outils, des investissements, etc. » (Interview Paille-Tech – Appendix 3)

3.4. Successful involvement mechanisms

In the previous sections, consideration has been given to governance and decision-making mechanisms as they are an important aspect of cooperators' involvement. Cooperatives try to maximize members' involvement in the decisions, operations, strategy and future. We will now move on to studying the involvement of cooperators in the cooperative life and activities by analysing the different mechanisms in place, meeting varying degrees of success, as evaluated by the respondents.

From the analysis of the functioning of cooperatives and by discussing with their founders, administrators or coordinators as part of this research, we have identified some recurring elements in their approach to members' involvement in the cooperative. One of these aspects lies in the successful mechanisms of involvement. Firstly, **training and support** should be provided to cooperators according to their position, roles and needs within the cooperative. For instance, CoBT provides management training for large companies at Solvay University for their future delegates and Directors in order to make sure that the individuals aiming for these functions have the ability to read financial statements, learn how a Board of Directors would operate, etc.⁵ On its side, Macavrac is internally developing a tool to help cooperators with working groups; it could be in the form of a handbook with information to help new cooperators get involved in existing working groups but also to help members of working groups to welcome new participants. Finally, SMarCoop finds it useful to offer volunteer cooperators to train new cooperators on the tools offered and used by the cooperative as they have developed an in-depth knowledge over time and use. In a nutshell, training and support are key to help cooperators to perform their tasks or to understand better the challenges and

opportunities of the project. By being informed, they feel more confident and capable and it results in a win-win situation for both the cooperative and the cooperators.

⁵ Benoît Haag: « Ce qui est essentiel en termes de gouvernance, c'est la formation. Nous leur avons bien expliqué leur future tâche en tant qu'associé, en tant que délégué, en tant qu'administrateur. Et pour les administrateurs, on prévoit une formation de gestion à la grande entreprise qui se passera à Solvay l'an prochain pour s'assurer que tout le monde sache lire un bilan comptable et sache comment fonctionne un conseil d'administration, etc. Cela nous a tout de suite paru essentiel étant donné que la gestion d'une grande entreprise n'est pas le métier premier de ces agriculteurs, nos coopérateurs. » (Interview CoBT – Appendix 4)

Another point raised for leading to success is how exchanges and **decision-making** processes are **organised** in large structures. For example, CoBT and Färm consider it essential to set up a system for the election of delegates and representatives.⁶ The categories of cooperators take part of more constructive and organized debates compared to when cooperators share their opinions all at once. CoBT, with 1400 cooperators, has already implemented this system while Färm plans to do so as soon as they see the number of cooperators increasing. With 350 cooperators currently, they do not yet see the need for such an arrangement, but they have identified it as a best practice in the decision-making process of cooperatives. In addition, SMartCoop, also being of a large size, considers that the participatory approach, contrary to most peoples' intuition, must be very focused and organized. This idea is in line with the idea of CoBT and Färm, which believe that a well-organised representation of the different types of cooperators undoubtedly promotes the constructive nature of the debates. The idea of having representatives of the different categories of cooperators is specific to multi-stakeholder cooperatives. We have observed that this structured approach takes better consideration the very different interests represented.

⁶ Michel Tillieut: « Pour cela on peut prendre un bon exemple de coopérative, la CoBT, qui a su réduire cette masse de coopérateurs en faisant élire des délégués dans différentes régions qui eux ensuite représentent et élisent les administrateurs pour ces coopérateurs au niveau des instances supérieures de la coopérative afin d'avoir des débats plus intelligents. » (Interview Färm.LLN – Appendix 7)

According to Paille Tech, two aspects are essential with view to effective involvement: a good **communication** but especially having a place where everyone is equal. To achieve this, the cooperative organizes a monthly team meeting where everyone takes part in turn and they look for solutions together. They emphasized the relevance of having as little difference in status as possible between the members of the cooperative and when making decisions, including in terms of salary. Similarly, CoBT stated that it is important to supervise the debate into the decision-making process and highlighted the need to be a "directed" democracy because cooperators do not necessarily have the adequate education to lead the discussions.⁷ According to CoBT, it is also necessary to know in which direction the cooperative wants to develop and take the time not to skip steps, as there is sometimes no turning back. Prior to its launch, CoBT has thought long and hard about how to build the categories of shares as well as the rights and duties of each. The structure must be well defined from the beginning in order to correspond to the social purpose of the cooperative. In addition, most cooperatives mentioned that good communication and transparency are key to efficient cooperators' involvement. As an example, some cooperatives regularly share information through newsletters. In addition, two of the cooperatives analysed, SMartCoop and Macavrac, mentioned the importance of taking into account the fact that not all cooperators can dedicate the same portion of their time to the cooperative.⁸ For this reason, the cooperatives try to ensure that meetings and activities proposed to them are well defined and prepared so that **everyone can still get involved** in a more targeted way. Making sure that the involvement and attendance in meetings is seen **a motivation** by the cooperators is fundamental; enjoyment and interest in the cooperative's project and activities should be the reason of their attendance.

⁷ Benoît Haag: « Il faut du temps et de l'énergie et être à l'écoute des gens, mais surtout baliser. Je crois que pour qu'une coopérative fonctionne bien, ça doit être une démocratie, mais une démocratie "dirigée", bien encadrée. Et il faut parfois être intransigeant, dur, et dire non, dire que telle chose va impliquer telle dérive, ou favoriser tel groupe par rapport à tel groupe, etc. Il faut avoir un rôle de gardien, mais surtout de pédagogue pour bien expliquer à des gens dont ce n'est pas le métier premier d'être investisseur, d'être gestionnaire d'entreprise. » (Interview CoBT – Appendix 4)

⁸ *Frédéric Grégoire : « Être multi-canaux c'est aussi important ; tout le monde n'a pas le même temps de s'impliquer, mais ce qui est aussi intéressant c'est de permettre à des gens qui ont beaucoup de choses à faire de s'impliquer malgré tout, mais peut-être à un endroit plus ciblé ou ça a été plus préparé. » (Interview SMartCoop – Appendix 8)*

Finally, it was found that Médor does not only focus on solely involving its cooperators but broaden the concept of stakeholders by **covering all its stakeholders**, namely its cooperators and readers who do not own shares.⁹ Their interaction with the cooperative differs however, with, on the one hand, the cooperators focussing on the cooperative's strategic development together with the Board of Directors and the General Assembly and, on the other hand, readers that are rather into defining the newspapers' content. SMartCoop is also willing to open its governance to other stakeholders of the project. There is a number of actors (local governments, local communities, suppliers, etc.) who show an interest in seeing this social project of collective interest move forward and involving all actors instead of representing only a portion of them would be more constructive. Although this is for the benefit of the users they support, they also welcome the involvement of local authorities and communities, customers and suppliers in order to create with all partners something meaningful that goes beyond a particular interest and benefit of a targeted actor.

⁹ *Laurence Jenard: « Notre méthode d'implication ne se limite pas uniquement aux coopérateurs, mais vraiment à toutes nos parties prenantes, au sens le plus large, en prenant en compte les coopérateurs, les lecteurs et les abonnés de Médor. Pour certains points on va plus impliquer certaines parties prenantes que d'autres : pour ce qui est de l'évolution de l'entreprise ce sera plus les coopérateurs tandis que les lecteurs seront plus impliqués dans le contenu. » (Interview Médor – Appendix 6)*

Most of the surveyed cooperatives organise **working groups** to involve their cooperators in discussions on topics pertinent to the cooperative and to think about the cooperative's future. This pragmatic way of involving members helps to foster debate and work towards a common vision of the cooperative's project. We noticed that two cooperatives use several groups for working on diverse topics. On the one hand, Macavrac has implemented ten working groups that deal with various matters; two individuals among the founders coordinate the groups, organize meetings and keep cooperators informed of the main developments.¹⁰ On the other hand, Färm has set up ten committees (i.e. working groups composed of cooperators) being

focused on specific topics, as well as discussion tables to generate ideas of new services that the cooperative could offer, such as home delivery. For its part, Paille Tech rather holds reflection groups around the concept of cooperative and what it implies for cooperators. In opposition, CoBT does not make use of working groups yet but they have plans to involve cooperators in working groups, in order to discuss purchasing procedures in particular. Finally, Macavrac and Urbike mentioned that cooperatives should define a timeframe for working groups to operate.¹¹ In their opinion, it would be far more appropriate and beneficial to set up punctual working groups with a distinct mission; cooperators can get involved for a defined period of time, ensuring a reduced likelihood of cooperators dropping out from groups due to lengthy assignments.

¹⁰ Florence Lanzi: « Actuellement, il y a une dizaine de groupe de travail, ils s'occupent d'un domaine spécifique. Par exemple, le groupe "produits" va s'occuper de rechercher les nouveaux produits et est en lien avec les producteurs ; il y a des groupes qui sont vraiment dans la gestion quotidienne et qui essaient de développer des nouveautés, etc. » (Interview Macavrac – Appendix 9)

¹¹ Philippe Lovens: « Le mieux c'est de mettre en place des sortes de groupes de travail ponctuels avec une mission claire et là alors les gens s'impliquent, mais il ne faut surtout pas que ça dure trop longtemps sinon les gens se décrochent. » (Interview Urbike – Appendix 5)

In short, responding cooperatives make it clear that several elements including training and support, structured approach of the decision-making process, good communication and transparency, cooperators motivation, involvement at different levels and to a broader scope of stakeholders as well as working groups are the keys of making members' involvement a success.

3.5. Less successful involvement mechanisms and actions to put in place

Depending on the type of structure, we easily note that some involvement mechanisms seem to be less efficient and adapted, as evaluated by the respondents. A first point of attention for the CoBT coordinator is at the governance level when individuals within the decision-making bodies such as the Board of Directors and the Executive Committee disagree about how to operate the cooperative properly. Several cooperatives mentioned that the lack of transparency, communication and explanation as well as not being inclusive enough with

cooperators on key topics could hinder cooperators' involvement. Among these elements leading to confusion, we observe cooperators allowing themselves to comment on everything, at any given time because that's their understanding of the concept. A lack of project's context is also likely to discourage cooperators. Moreover, we observe the same involvement issue with several interviewees (SMartCoop, Färm, Médor and Urbike). According to the coordinator of the newspaper Médor, a lack of support and follow-up to help cooperators with the management aspects of the projects they are involved in seem to inevitably lead to failure; involvement alone is not sufficient.¹² In turn, Paille Tech was facing non-specialization of the cooperators at the beginning; unclear roles led to endless meetings where everyone was giving its opinion on any topic. Because such approach was not sustainable, the structure had to be reworked to ensure that appropriate decisions could be taken, that everyone identifies its own responsibilities and that cooperators know when it is suitable to express its views. Finally, at Macavrac, there is something quite paradoxical in terms of cooperators' involvement: on the one hand, some cooperators do not get much involved from the start while, on the other hand, others get too involved in the first place but get exhausted after a few months and distance themselves from the cooperative's activities. Finding the right balance from the beginning is therefore key for a constant involvement over time.

¹² Laurence Jenard : « On a essayé il y a un ou deux ans, à la suite d'un appel à projets pour des coopérateurs qui souhaitaient plus s'impliquer, d'organiser avec SAW-B plusieurs réunions pour voir exactement dans quelles activités ils voulaient mieux s'impliquer dans la coopérative. Et il s'est avéré que ce qu'ils voulaient c'était plus pour la promotion. On a donc essayé de lancer cela, mais comme on était que deux en interne pour gérer cela, on n'a pas su assez les soutenir par manque de temps. On essayait d'organiser avec eux des soirées de lancement pour des nouveaux numéros. » (Interview Médor – Appendix 6)

Once those elements have been identified, they can be worked on in order to be improved; this is why we have analysed the actions and involvement mechanisms that cooperatives are willing to **implement in the future**. We found that four cooperatives (SMartCoop, Färm, Médor and Urbike) consider stakeholders' involvement as time-consuming and not self-sufficient. According to them, it is essential to have one person (or more, depending on the size of the cooperative) in charge of the cooperative's life in order to work together with cooperators on a regular basis and to ensure proper communication. Urbike is however

currently reluctant to involve cooperators further as the founders believe that managing cooperators' involvement in such a small structure would result in a waste of time. While cooperators have been mainly a source of financial support and energy for the team until now, they plan on creating a community and to offer cooperators a more active role in the future. But as long as they remain such a small structure with few resources, they find it more appropriate to focus on decent salaries for the couriers, rather than having an additional person on board exclusively dedicated to taking care of the cooperators and their involvement. Another aspect that was noticed lies in the desire of proximity with stakeholders. Médor is a good example with its project to get as close as possible to its readers. The cooperative works with freelance journalists who consequently do not meet in Médor's office in Brussels. They are willing to decentralize the editorial staff to different locations in Wallonia in order to get closer to the readers and enjoy more frequent and high-quality dialogue. Finally, several cooperatives expressed their wish to improve communication with cooperators in order to inform them better and answer their questions. To achieve this, some cooperatives plan to invest in financial and human resources; including websites, newsletters and individuals in charge of the cooperative life.

To conclude on this point, communication, transparency and dialogue are key elements for a good understanding of the cooperative, its activities and strategy, as well as an organized and structured approach of the members' involvement in decisions and activities.

Discussion and conclusions

In the present thesis, we analysed, from a theoretical perspective, the functioning of cooperatives and the involvement of their members. It enabled us to draw the cooperatives' principles and characteristics as well as the motivations of cooperators to become involved. It has subsequently been decided to concentrate on multi-stakeholder cooperatives with view to studying more specifically the involvement of their members.

In order to achieve this objective, we conducted a research with multi-stakeholder cooperatives and questioned their coordinators, founders or administrators in order to bring to light the mechanisms they use to involve their members. Thanks to the comparative analysis of the cooperative, the various practices could be categorised in the form of a table based on key themes. This led us to discuss, in the form of a cross-analysis, existing practices of members' involvement, both in terms of governance as well as in the cooperative's activities.

By means of the theoretical and practical elements identified, the research will be concluded by making recommendations to cooperatives regarding the involvement of their members.

1. Theoretical implications

1.1. RICS Professional Guidance

In analysing the stakeholder engagement theories in the present thesis, we examined the ten principles from the RICS Professional Guidance (MacNicol, Griffin, Mansell, 2014). Three of these principles stand out from the interviews and appear as having a primary role in stimulating participation of cooperators.

In particular, the first RICS principle "Communicate" resonates in our findings. In fact, we saw that communication was essential to avoid misunderstanding each other's objectives and mission. Also, during the interviews, several interviewees (Paille-Tech and CoBT and Färm.LLN) stressed this point and the importance of transparency.

A second principle in line with our analysis is "Plan it". According to this principle of RICS Professional Guidance, participation planning leads to better engagement. This involves planning the tasks and resources available to stakeholders. For example, Florence Lanzi,

Macavrac's co-coordinator, wants to set up guidelines to help newcomers who are not used to operate in work groups. They noticed that being in charge of tasks in the early days of involvement wasn't successful because they had not had enough information. Also, at the beginning of Paille-Tech, there was a non-specialization of everyone, with unclear roles which made decision-making very difficult. At CoBT, we also observed the importance of properly marking out the cooperative's structure from the beginning to avoid any future problems of involvement.

As mentioned in Principle 7 of The RICS Professional Guidance, "Just part of managing risk", it can sometimes be difficult to assess the time and effort required to engage stakeholders. In fact, several cooperatives such as Médor, SMartCoop, Färm.LLN or Urbike mentioned that involvement was not self-sufficient, which leads us to believe that involvement must be considered as a category of risk as well as an opportunity for the organisation. Indeed, as Laurence Jenard, from Médor said that a lack of support and follow-up to help cooperators with the management aspects of the projects they are involved in seem to inevitably lead to failure because involvement alone is not sufficient.

1.2. The participation chain

This thesis confirms the participation chain model of Birchall and Simmons (2004) and adds some complexity to it. To recall, this model mobilises three levels of factors that act independently of each other but influence stakeholder participation. Among the good practices to be implemented according to the cooperatives interviewed, we find mainly the strengthening of the three levels highlighted by the authors in their model, namely resources, mobilisation and motivation, and add a time dimension to the mobilisation level.

The first point is the resources available to participants to help them to get involved. Indeed, this factor would help to determine which individuals would become active or not. During the interviews we saw that several cooperatives (CoBT, Médor, SMartCoop) mentioned the importance of informing cooperators and being as transparent as possible with them. There are different means such as meetings, newsletters, etc. We also saw in the interviews that CoBT offered management training to its cooperators, mainly directors or delegates. Also, Macavrac was seeking to put in place a way to guide cooperators through their involvement in a workgroup. All these resources are designed to facilitate the involvement of members in the cooperation and therefore support the theory of Birchall and Simmons.

Then, we observed the mobilisation that is supported by the importance of communication in cooperatives. Indeed, according to Paille-Tech, communication is crucial, and Färm.LLN has mentioned that they realized that it was necessary to set up other additional methods to constantly improve communication with cooperators. Finally, CoBT mentioned the importance of efficient communication within the decision-making bodies such as the Board of Directors and the Executive Committee, due to the fact that this has a direct impact on the overall functioning of the cooperative. Our findings finally show that for mobilization to be effective, it should start as soon as a cooperator joins a cooperative. As highlighted for instance by Laurence Jénard (Médor), failing to do so is likely to lead to lower levels of participation in the long run. As a consequence, it appears that a time dimension and condition should be added to Birchall and Simmons' model (2004), which they only slightly account for by emphasizing the feedback effect of participation – i.e., cooperators are likely to participate more if they have a good experience of participation, and the other way around.

Thirdly, for motivation, we have seen that the certain cooperatives (SMartCoop and Macavrac) pay particular attention to ensuring that involvement and participation in cooperative's meetings remain perceived as motivating by the cooperators. They also believe that the reason of these participants' attendance must remain a pleasure and show interest in the project and activities of the cooperative.

2. Implications for cooperatives

During the analysis, we have found that involvement is not self-sufficient; for a successful achievement, it is essential to take the time to support cooperators in their tasks and to give them accurate and timely information. Transparency and frequent communication with the cooperators are also factors of success. It was however observed that, even in small cooperatives, the work on communication can be time consuming and labour intensive. This is why larger cooperatives, where communication with the cooperators must be improved, are recommended to dedicate an employee to this end, together with the supervision of the cooperative life for instance. In some cases, we have noticed that cooperatives used websites and newsletters to improve internal communication.

Individuals do not necessarily have the appropriate training and tools needed to understand how a cooperative works or to identify the issues arising from its practices. It is therefore

recommended that cooperatives train their cooperators, on one side, on the cooperative operational focus and, on the other side, on membership in a collaborative society, which is not necessarily understood by all. Cooperators' education and training, with view to improving the functioning and development of the cooperative, are two principles articulated by International Co-operative Alliance (International Co-operative Alliance, 2015; Oczkowski, Krivokapic-Skoko, Plummer, 2013).

Some cooperatives highlighted the need of having a focused approach; in other words, ensuring a robust structure before setting it up so that it matches perfectly the cooperative's needs. A governance framework must also be put in place to achieve the cooperative's social purpose. Especially in the case of multi-stakeholder cooperatives, it is vital to thoroughly think about how to articulate the different categories of shares as well as the cooperators' rights and obligations in each of these categories. We therefore recommend, from the very beginning, to take the time to decide in which direction the cooperative wishes to head, to define everyone's roles and to determine how cooperators will contribute to governance and activities. In addition, it is essential to supervise the involvement of the cooperators and guide them through their actions. Cooperation must be framed as it can sometimes lead to confusion; planning and organising periods for giving its opinion and answering questions is necessary.

Treating cooperators equally and put them on an equal footing are key. They should all be given the opportunity to express their opinions and have them taken into consideration. Democracy and equality among stakeholders are part of the cooperatives' values stated by the International Co-operative Alliance (Somerville, 2007). When a cooperative reaches a number of cooperators that no longer allows for democratic and constructive debates, it is recommended to elect delegates for each category of cooperators in order to represent them in the cooperative's decision-making bodies.

Working groups or brainstorming sessions are an efficient and entertaining solution to involve cooperators into working and debating on particular topics. This makes it possible to get cooperators into groups on specific subjects concerning the cooperatives' strategy or future. The functioning of these groups should be properly marked out before their start. The purpose is that cooperators do not get confused and know what to do in case of issues or questions.

3. Limitations and future researches

It is important to mention that the thesis proposes a qualitative analysis, and our sampling strategy was therefore looking for diversity rather than statistical representativeness of the population. In addition, the analysis of seven cooperatives led to an in-depth study, but we must keep in mind that it does not allow to review all possible or existing cases. However, concrete and significant results have been still been achieved at this stage.

We must also mention the geographical limit, as the interviews were limited to cooperatives in Belgium and more precisely in Wallonia and Brussels for reasons of language, among others. Indeed, following the cultures, the elements obtained during the interviews could be different. For example, the successful and less successful mechanisms mentioned may not be valid in all cultures.

Also, the objective of the theoretical part of the present work was to gain a better understanding of the different aspects of cooperatives and of cooperators' involvement in these organisations. Therefore, it does not represent an exhaustive literature review, which would have required a wider analysis of the existing literature on the subject.

In order to further develop this research topic, it would be interesting to conduct a more statistical study on stakeholders' involvement in cooperatives through a questionnaire using the results of the present thesis to frame the questions. A wider audience of multi-stakeholder cooperatives could be reached, which would, as a consequence, improve statistical representativeness.

Moreover, it may also be interesting for future research to analyse the subject from a different angle; based on the cooperators' testimonies instead of those of permanent members. This will make it possible to better understand the motivations of the cooperators, the perception of their involvement, the difficulties they face, etc. Cooperators will also be able to discuss the areas that could be improved with view to a more efficient involvement.

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