

Challenges in Managing Organizations in the Social, Solidarity & Popular Economy: An Analysis of Three Experiences of Generating Partnership Networks

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Abstract

Factorial is a worker cooperative in Buenos Aires, Argentina, that provides professional services to cooperatives and actors in the social, solidarity, and popular economy. This chapter aims to contribute to the debate around company ownership by looking at how worker cooperatives function in the country and the way their workers form part of the capital of each cooperative. The joint ownership of business capital in these cooperatives entails a series of challenges and responsibilities for their workers, which will be problematized in this paper. In addition, an account is given of three experiences of cooperative networks in order to show how the creation of these networks can be useful for thinking about and meeting the challenges involved in managing companies in the social, solidarity, and popular economy.

Keywords: social, solidarity, and popular economy, worker cooperatives, challenges, partnership networks

INTRODUCTION

In 2011, motivated by the desire to create tools for accompanying the process of workers recovering businesses in the city of Buenos Aires, a group of young social science students promoted the design and application of management tools for cooperatives with the objective of supporting the self-management work being undertaken within these cooperatives. In this context, the students founded their own worker cooperative, Factorial Ltda.

Over the years, the cooperative has focused its efforts on developing more and better services for businesses where labor takes priority over capital, and on incorporating more like-minded people in the construction of a business model that bases its sustainability on solidarity and partnership with other companies.

We aim for our cooperative to be more than just a way to earn a living; we also see it as a project that promotes individual and collective transformation, immersed in the social and political processes that affect our country and, in a broader sense, our region. The starting point was to establish a company managed by its own workers, and now we are broadening our horizons in pursuit of a national economy that is fair and free, and that prioritizes solidarity and participation. In our day-to-day practice, we strive for the transformation of individualist and consumerist values through personal commitment to the collective; solidarity among workers; making use of the capacities of each partner; and the ongoing development of ideas, innovations, and organizational and associative methods.

Today, our cooperative comprises an interdisciplinary group whose primary objective is to provide specialized professional services for cooperatives, pre-cooperative groups, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and productive initiatives within the social, solidarity and popular economy (SSPE). These organizations face similar problems, and the challenge we set ourselves is to make a qualitative contribution to the specific, customized treatment of each productive unit with solutions generated jointly. We analyze the forms of production, commercialization, development, and integration, and we focus on the pursuit of scale and the generation of partnership networks. We are convinced that the SSPE, with a marked feminist orientation, is the framework for fostering genuine, sovereign labor.

We offer economic and financial planning tools, accounting advice, training, research, communication, and design. Our cooperative consists of seven important areas, all horizontally connected through the component of cooperative education characterized by popular and feminist educational practice.

THE CONCEPT OF THE SOCIAL, SOLIDARITY, AND POPULAR ECONOMY

It is no easy task to conceptualize the SSPE; there is no single definition, approach or perspective that encompasses the wide variety of initiatives, experiences, territories, and people involved in finding new ways to relate and constructing different forms of work, consumption, and expansive reproduction of life. In this section, we set out to define some lines of analysis that will allow us to debate and reflect on our practices as unfolding economic, political, and social reality. The intention is not to make a conceptual distinction between social economy, solidarity economy, and popular economy; on the contrary, in all the cases we speak of other economies that set themselves apart from the capitalist economy as a world system. In the same way, people are the main component, the leading character and the engine of the SSPE, and we aim to articulate all aspects of people and their community.

Cooperativism emerged in the late 19th century, a time when the capitalist state was taking shape, as a response to the economic situation, needs, and inequalities that workers were struggling with in the age of the Industrial Revolution. The initiative for the cooperativist movement was taken by the most disadvantaged sectors of society, who appealed to certain values, such as solidarity, mutual aid, and democratic practices, in an effort to generate new identities. In this context, the social and solidarity economy (SSE) arose as a practice of a group of people who sought to change the logic by which, up to then, labor and the distribution of goods had been organized in society. The objective was to create alternatives, through cooperatives and mutual-aid societies, to the stark inequalities that the worldwide spread of the capitalist economy was leaving in its wake.

We situate the consolidation of the SSE and the popular economy (PE) in Argentina over the last twenty years. We can state that this consolidation occurred as one of the consequences of the exclusion of broad sectors of the population in our country and the imposition and development of the neoliberal model. Given the social policies implemented by the neoliberal model in a context where a high level of structural unemployment jeopardized both the survival of many individual families and social integration, many people turned to the autonomous organization of their productive projects as an alternative to the loss of their livelihood. Some people chose to do this

individually, while others began to associate in cooperatives, community production groups, or small family production units. Since then, innovative experiences of cooperativism have emerged in Argentina and other Latin American countries, particularly worker cooperatives.

Many of SSE experiences in Argentina consist of businesses and factories taken over by their workers. Starting in the 1990s, a close correlation emerged between the performance of macroeconomic variables, such as GNP, and the number of businesses recovered by their workers (Programa Facultad Abierta, 2014). In a similar dynamic that shared the recovered factories' prioritization of their workers' well-being over the interest in the reproduction of capital, numerous cooperative experiences appeared in the country in the popular sector, either family-based or organized as partnerships, where management was characterized by solidarity, mutual aid and the development of democratic practices. Thus, we are witnessing a convergence of specifically SSE practices with others from the popular sector, promoted by organizations that we place within the SSPE spectrum.

For the capitalist economy, labor is just one more resource that is bought and sold on the market. The social economy proposes regarding labor as a transforming, creative, and liberating activity that should not be reduced to the material reproduction of life, and that the objective of economic life is the integral development of individuals and not the unlimited pursuit and accumulation of profits. The social economy aims for equality in the distribution of the goods and benefits of labor, and rejects both the depredation of nature and the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few.

Razeto (1999) suggests thinking about different economies and proposes joining the concepts of economy and solidarity with the theoretical intention of seeing solidarity introduced into the economy itself, where it can operate and act in the different phases of the economic cycle, i.e., production, circulation, consumption, and accumulation, as well as in the theoretical developments that sustain it. This gives rise to a new economic rationality made up of different forms of organization. For Razeto (1999), the notion of a solidarity economy does not deny the market economy; rather it serves to provide a critical and transformative orientation for the overall structures and forms of organization and action that characterize the contemporary economy. The concept of solidarity encompasses two dimensions that are part of a feedback process: on the one hand, is the solidarity found in the

organizations of the traditional economy, which entails a progressive and growing process of solidarity within the global economy; on the other hand, is the solidarity that consists of a gradual process of construction and development of a special sector of the economy. We can say that the popular economy is the set of economic activities and social practices undertaken by the popular sectors of the population with an eye to making use of their own labor and available resources to meet their material and immaterial needs (Tiribia, 2001).

THE CHALLENGES OF COLLECTIVE MANAGEMENT IN SOCIAL, SOLIDARITY & POPULAR ECONOMY ORGANIZATIONS

Thanks to the work we have shared in the SSPE sector over the years with different startups, production, and cooperative units, and on the basis of our own experience with this labor format, we can state that all self-managed organizations have needs and issues that they need to address with respect to the importance of collective organization and management with the aim of not only being productive but also promoting the reproduction of life in a broad and comprehensive sense. Some of these needs are tied in with what we call the triple challenge: being owners, partners, and workers. Thus, in concrete terms, we can see how the joint ownership of business capital is reflected in the day-to-day operations of SSPE organizations, and offers their workers the chance to sit at the wheel of their own businesses and steer it in the direction they want to go; at the same time, it leaves them the responsibility for managing each one of the business units. This responsibility implies a series of difficulties that the workers must deal with as they manage their organizations.

Dialogue with SSPE workers allows us to recognize some of these difficulties in different areas. In the first place, some organizations have problems related to democratic decision-making in management, which is reflected in the difficulty of ensuring that all the workers take an active part in this management. Second, we also observe that not all the workers in SSPE organizations show the same level of commitment to the organization's project, and this can cause internal frictions. This variable degree of commitment can be explained by workers' different experiences in the organization or the way they see the future of the project, which often leads to tensions that can undermine harmonious coexistence within the organization.

Another issue that comes up frequently is individual workers' punctuality and attendance; this is considered a problem that must be dealt with. Finally, the project's productivity is also presented as a problem because it is one of the indispensable conditions for the survival of the project (Cooperativa Factorial et al., 2017).

In managing their organizations, SSPE workers have come up with different tools for dealing with these issues. We believe there are different internal organization formats that have proven their usefulness and can help to solve problems that arise in the day-to-day operations of partnership-based organizations. As a result of our work with SSPE organizations and our own experience as a worker cooperative, we can affirm that collective, self-managed, and partnership work faces daily challenges precisely because its political, social, and economic essence goes against the dominant ways of working and our own subjectivities. Joint decision-making, economic participation, collective leaderships as a way to organize work and capital, and the democratization of organizational processes come together to generate governance systems that aim to question a capitalist world system that is not only economic but also implicated in power relations and a stark division of labor. All of this implies other ways of organizing work and reproducing life that are in opposition to the *statu quo* and what is expected for workers, which represents a never-ending challenge. A fundamental tool for meeting this challenge is the creation of partnership networks.

PARTNERSHIP NETWORKS AS FACILITATORS OF COLLECTIVE MANAGEMENT

The establishment of partnership networks as a possible answer to some of the challenges faced by self-managed organizations led us, on the basis of Factorial's history, to form closer ties with different actors and to replicate these experiences in productive sectors other than our own. In this way, over the last few years, we have undertaken a variety of participatory research projects to consolidate pre-existing networks in some cases, and to generate others where none existed.

Different authors point to the importance of partnership networks, and observe that cooperatives form networks naturally because of their associative character, their democratic decision-making, and their cooperative identity

rooted in their values and principles (Halary, 2006; Birchall & Simmons, 2008; Menzani & Zamagni, 2010). They also argue that in regions with a large concentration of cooperatives, a number of positive externalities appear that encourage integration, such as management capacities, social capital, access to financing, and ties to the supply chain (Halary, 2006). In the final analysis, it is about sharing knowledge among similar-minded organizations so that they can compete with companies whose capital gives them outsized power (Novkovic, 2008).

As we have already mentioned, contexts of socioeconomic crises give rise to scenarios that facilitate the emergence of worker cooperatives because the priority given to caring for people over capital is one of the characteristics that enable companies that have been ruined in times of crisis to become viable again under worker management without making major changes. This is the rationality that underlies cooperatives' resilience in the face of crisis (Sánchez & Roelants, 2012). However, as the context improves and the economy is reactivated, new challenges emerge and one of them is the possibility of improving the company's conditions for entering the market so that it becomes an economically viable option of resistance, and not just an alternative. Here we can visualize the numerous difficulties that worker cooperatives face, the most urgent being the economic weakness resulting from their structural position, since almost all are SMES that cannot access credit easily. Moreover, these are companies that either started out without capital or came back from bankruptcy, which also entails specific obstacles. Finally, cooperatives, by placing their workers in the center of the picture, reject typical business practices, such as downsizing to reduce costs. This makes it important to design creative alternatives to sustain jobs, and even increase them, while keeping the company competitive.

All of these issues underscore the importance of having more complex debates and considering a wide variety of actions aimed at the sustainability of SSPE experiences in general, and of worker cooperatives in particular. Applying a criterion of strict microeconomic sustainability (Caballero, 2004; Coraggio, 2008) to a worker cooperative serves only to skew the debate since it takes hegemonic methodological individualism for granted, leaving out of the conversation the impact on jobs and the environment, which the SSPE seeks to integrate. Inverting the bases of the strict microeconomic criterion implies changing the axis of analysis from the micro to the mesoeconomic

level. SSPE initiatives have the potential to counteract the force of capital if they are constituted as an open subsystem linked internally through ties of exchange, cooperation, and solidarity that can control the tendencies of unbridled profit-seeking and competition that the capitalist market tries to impose. We believe that by intensifying efforts to build a stronger sense of partnership and solidarity we can come up with perspectives that will make strategic contributions to the sustainability of the SSPE.

This mesoeconomic integration strategy has been identified as necessary, and unfurled as a political banner in different manifestations of the cooperative movement in our country. However, the difficulties of actually making it happen can be attributed to different causes, the most important being the lack of professionals and technical know-how to put the theoretical-political integration proposal into practice. As a result, we see the need to carry out studies, research and analyses of cases of integration from a rigorous technical perspective in order to come up with the right theoretical tools to create and strengthen cooperative sectoral networks, while also encouraging teachers, researchers and technicians to incorporate and deepen their empirical knowledge of the issues and challenges of the SSPE, and to commit to its development. The joint contribution of technical know-how and social commitment is an indispensable factor that multiplies the conditions for productive and commercial articulation among networks and cooperatives, and thus leads to direct results of the applied research process.

Given the articulation and integration process that many cooperative experiences in Argentina have undertaken, a number of cooperative federations have been formed, along with several confederations. At the same time, steps have been taken to build sectoral networks to promote joint business strategies that strengthen each one of their members. The sectoral articulation experience with the most extensive track record is the Federación Red Gráfica Cooperativa (Cooperative Graphic Network Federation), which has achieved a solid market position and sustainable development through cooperative integration and commitment to the community. This network has enabled the member cooperatives to make gains in scale and synergies, thus reaping comparative and competitive advantages.

The federation comprises 30 graphic companies organized as worker cooperatives, each one with over 950 partners. Among the benefits, aside from the savings generated through productive expansion, the complementing

of products and services, and the optimization of processes through the reduction of structures, they have secured access to new common services financed by the organization, the joint development of cooperative management instruments, spaces for cooperative training, and the creation of a common fund as an instrument that has increased their capacity for savings, financing and technological advancement. The experience of the Graphic Network is illustrative as a reference for the creation of business networks of cooperatives, and represents an undeniable example for the entire sector of worker cooperativism in our country, so much so that its experience has inspired the formation of a number of sectoral networks in the areas of technology (Federación Argentina de Cooperativas de Trabajo de Tecnología, Innovación y Conocimiento/Argentine Federation of Technology, Innovation and Knowledge Worker Cooperatives), textiles (Red Textil Cooperativa/Cooperative Textile Network), communication (Red Colmena, Hive Network), and food production (Federación de Organizaciones Productoras de Alimentos/Federation of Food Production Organizations).

CASE ANALYSES: RED METALÚRGICA COOPERATIVA (COOPERATIVE METALLURGICAL NETWORK)

In 2012, the Cooperative National Metallurgical Network (RMNC in its initials in Spanish) was constituted as a comprehensive productive initiative for the purpose of articulating the commercial and productive activities of cooperatives from the metallurgical sector of the southern region of the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area, and enabling them to achieve greater overall business solidity. This networking project had the support of the Quilmes Branch of the Metallurgical Workers' Union and of the Federation of Worker Cooperatives of the Argentine Republic. Both of these entities share the motivation that gave rise to the initiative: The institutional and productive consolidation of cooperative entities made up of associated metallurgical workers. It is worth noting that this integration and consolidation project is taking place in a key strategic sector of our country's industrial sector—metallurgy—that has been battered by waves of crisis, weakening its structural capacity to compete.

Factorial's partners, together with the Center for Labor Sociology Studies,¹ conducted a research project on the RMNC, in the understanding that this was an initiative that had already made significant headway in its formal consolidation, but that still faced significant obstacles to effective operation, including the complexity of each cooperative's day-to-day activities, the different management systems, the evident difficulties in incorporating productive innovations, and the low level of integration of processes linking production among geographically disperse companies. The objectives of this project were defined on the basis of a diagnosis that pointed to the need to complement the institutional political will to integrate with analyses and technical tools that would actually make it happen. We set out to reach these objectives by analyzing the characteristics of the market where the metallurgical cooperatives operated, designing an adequate structure for the network to perform effectively, and formulating a plan of action for pursuing the opportunities to integrate the metallurgical cooperatives.

The project was carried out in 2015 and 2016, when we worked in depth with four of RMNC's cooperatives: Galaxia, a cooperative that designs and produces air extractors, duct fans and vacuums, kitchen extractor hoods, and openings; Mecber, which produces machined aluminum parts for the automotive industry and electrical boxes; La Esperanza, a cooperative that designs and produces extractors and purifiers, motors for air extraction and ventilation, kitchen extractors, ceiling turbos, and fans; and 7 de Septiembre, which manufactures motors for domestic and industrial use: blowers, dryers, fans, polishers, jacuzzis, grinders, turbo blowers, blood extractors, and dental drills.

In the first stage of the project, we did empirical research on the four cooperatives; the objective was to come up with a diagnosis that we could use to formulate recommendations that would help the organizations to improve their internal management, while also analyzing the feasibility of linking production processes. To determine the basis for the viability of integrating as a network, the analysis aimed to quantify current production

1. This center forms part of the degree program in Economics of the Department of Economic Science of the University of Buenos Aires.

capacity, the different production processes, the inputs, the main customers, and the machines used in each cooperative. We evaluated the possibilities for integration and analyzed the variables that would make inter-company coordination possible. We studied the possibility of synergy among cooperatives in approaching potential markets to assess the feasibility of undertaking joint production, investment, and commercial strategies. All of this was aimed at strengthening each metallurgical company through the RMNC; ultimately, one of the main purposes of the research was to articulate conclusions and guidelines from the initial survey that would contribute to an action proposal for the RMNC by planning the tasks needed to strengthen its productive and commercial unit.

On the basis of the field work, which included surveying all the cooperatives using questionnaires and in-depth interviews, we categorized the cooperatives' production evaluation and installed capacity in terms of production diversity, production management, installed capacity, outsourced processes, inputs, suppliers, and investments. Below we summarize the findings in each of these categories:

- **Production diversity.** We observed significant diversity in the RMNC's production offer, which we divided into two main categories: durable household items, on the one hand, and components and machined parts for the automotive industry, on the other. At a second level, we found design, machining, installation, and maintenance services for a wide variety of demands ranging from small household items to specialized pipelines.
- **Production management and planning.** One of our conclusions is that the RMNC cooperatives' production management could be perfected in overall terms if they built planning capacities; diversified production toward products with greater sales and higher profit margins; defined optimal production lots; and maximized times, eliminated bottlenecks, adjusted their rhythm to seasonal demand and strategically managed final product stock as a function of production costs.
- **Installed capacity.** On the basis of what we observed in visits to the cooperatives, we can state that currently a low percentage of installed capacity is being used, less than 60%. As for the machinery, which on average has over 20 years of use, it is time to evaluate the high level of wear and

obsolescence. This factor represents the main drag on production rhythm, worker/hour productivity, and the development of production innovations. Finally, the analysis of installed capacity highlights the need to formulate a comprehensive maintenance plan that encompasses the prevention and prediction of breakdowns in durable equipment to prolong the useful life of the components that constitute the plant, and to reduce the economic impact of repairs and production downtime.

- **Outsourced processes.** RMNC's cooperatives outsource painting, molding, and plastic injection services; long-distance shipping; the preventive maintenance and renovation of machinery; and molding for complex machinery, among other processes. This is often a question of scale: The size of the cooperatives does not justify investing large amounts of money, time or labor. The study suggests that the RMNC, in its capacity as a large cooperative company, could invest in providing these services and thus lower costs for all of its members.

- **Inputs.** One of the characteristics of the metallurgical sector is that the cost of inputs represents a high percentage of the overall cost. In the case of RMNC's cooperatives, this percentage falls between 60 and 80%, which means that a slight change in the price of inputs has a strong impact on total costs. Moreover, the cooperatives' capacity to negotiate prices tends to be low or non-existent because they do not purchase in large amounts. There are, however, certain products that are used often and in large quantities, which leads to the conclusion that unifying these purchases would improve the RMNC cooperatives' economic profitability by enhancing their negotiating capacity with suppliers and allowing them to exceed the minimum purchase volume required for preferential pricing.

- **Investments.** Investment tends not to be a variable that is strategically analyzed in the RMNC; generally, the projection of the companies' growth and the accumulation of durable capital are not expressed in the medium and long-term objectives. In recent years, the cooperatives have managed to invest in some replacement machines for indispensable production processes, although the percentage of investment in machinery in general is low. Causes include the lack of strategic projection, the high cost of industrial machinery, the lack of a domestic supply, and cooperatives' limited access to credit. Low-complexity tools and machines tend to be purchased with in-house funds, but investment becomes difficult when

costly machines are involved. For major investments, cooperatives have sometimes made use of subsidies and low-interest loans from public agencies or entities from the SSPE sector.

Finally, our research work concluded with a series of recommendations and proposals aimed at strengthening the integration of the RMNS metallurgical cooperatives; these recommendations and proposals emerged from the analysis of the survey data gathered over the course of the project. One of the most important has to do with the feasibility of taking steps toward the productive and commercial integration of the RMNC without the need to invest large amounts of the partners' resources, money and time in the process, more than they could really afford. Below we summarize these recommendations, which have been classified by time frame into short, medium and long term.

First of all, we realized that it was necessary in the short term to design an RMNC commercial web page; to implement an e-commerce space on social networks and electronic platforms; to design a graphic catalogue of RMNC products; and to create a commercial area specializing in analyzing the overall supply, putting together supply packages, and taking key commercial development actions, such as promotion, advertising, brochures, customer service by telephone, call agenda, database of contacts, and commercial relations.

In the medium term, we mentioned the usefulness of deepening commercial exchanges of goods and services among RMNC's cooperatives by minimizing the outsourcing of goods and services; establishing a joint system for purchasing inputs; setting up a logistical framework for the rotation and joint use of machinery; internalizing outsourced processes among the cooperatives themselves; exchanging knowledge and skills regarding the purchase-sale of services and also technical formation; spreading the word about the potentials of the different cooperatives' work teams with an eye to making use of the RMNC's skilled labor; appointing people to take charge the RMNC's maintenance and administration; including professional accounting, legal, engineering, and design services for the specific needs of the RMNC or its cooperatives; designing and managing joint lines of financing; and setting up the RMNC's own transportation logistics to meet the needs of partner cooperatives.

Finally, of the long-term proposals we wish to highlight the usefulness of the vertical integration of the production chain, with a focus on the specialization of the cooperatives in different stages of the same process, and the planning of strategic investments on the part of the RMNC, such as the purchase of durable equipment, its own installations, innovative processes, research, and development.

Another objective running parallel to the technical guidelines of integration was helping the metallurgical cooperatives' partners gain a deeper understanding of the possibilities and potentialities of the RMNC. For this, we proposed a systematic dissemination of the partial results of the different stages of the research project. In addition, in our capacity as research group we took part in different academic dissemination events; representatives from the cooperatives and federations involved were also invited to take part in the exchange in their role as RMNC partners. This work of dissemination and debate among the partner cooperatives was intended to highlight the benefits of working together, thus serving to reinforce the political will and the conviction needed to assume the fundamental commitments for nurturing the RMNC's productive and commercial life.

THE CASE OF THE RED DE CONSTRUCCIÓN COOPERATIVA (COOPERATIVE CONSTRUCTION NETWORK)

While there have been some experiences of network formation in different productive sectors, in the construction industry no such network has been created. Considering the examples that we have already presented, and realizing the enormous benefits that they produced for the associated cooperatives, we came up with the idea of promoting the creation of a federation of cooperatives specifically for the construction sector, which gave rise to the Cooperative Construction Network (RCC, in its initials in Spanish).

The need for a cooperative construction network arose from a previous analysis of the organizations in the sector. On this basis, during the project formulation stage, Factorial's associates, together with those of TAVA²

2. Tava is a cooperative architectural firm made up of professionals who are strongly committed to their work and their profession; it offers a way of working that comprises the entire process from the participatory conception of the projects to the actual building, in which the leading players of the projects are the people who will later inhabit the spaces.

and Architecture professors from the Universidad Nacional de Avellaneda,³ proposed setting up occasions for meetings, training and consulting aimed at promoting a network tied to the construction sector; the objective was to promote vertical and horizontal productive integration and thus to help overcome the obstacles that cooperatives in the construction industry face. Some of these obstacles have to do with the cooperatives' size and with legal and operational difficulties that impede access to an economy of scale, to quality volumes of demand, and to purchasing advantages, to name just a few. The importance of integrating the RCC lies in its potential for generating inter-university initiatives that can provide scientific, technological, and economic consulting that helps to strengthen the organizations and the formation of links for transferring knowledge to regional productive actors on topics such as logistical coordination, problems related to self-management, product development, business plans, and administrative management.

The execution of the project involved a number of stages, each one with specific tasks and objectives. First, we made a survey of construction-sector cooperatives and SMEs in the City of Buenos Aires and the inner ring of the metropolitan area. This survey was then analyzed in terms of a series of variables gathered from each of the organizations, having to do with a brief history of each organization, forms of commercial and productive organization, and economic and administrative management. On the basis of the analysis of these variables, we selected a sub-group of organizations that we identified as potential actors in the RCC. The choice of some over the others was primarily owing to two reasons: Their actual intention to participate in collective articulation, and their needs, with preference given to those that could be met by the actions that would result from an effective operation of the RCC. In most cases, these needs revolved around an urgency to increase the sales flow.

3. The Architecture degree program of the Universidad Nacional de Avellaneda, which belongs to the Department of Architecture, Design and Urban Planning, aims to develop an integrative, multidisciplinary setting where people can gain a more complete understanding of the world we live in, as well as the best strategies to follow to keep it in optimal conditions. The program makes an explicit environmental commitment to society and to future generations.

The sub-group with which we carried out the project consisted of Coinpo, SA, an SME focused on building all types of metallic structures, industrial warehouses, hangars, roofs, crawl spaces, and ironwork; the worker cooperative La Nacional, a company created in 2003 by a group of workers with over 40 years of experience in the field, specializing in carpentry in general; Cooperativa de Trabajo Surco (Surco Worker Cooperative), which provides construction services in a wide range of civil works; Cooperativa de Trabajo Ingecoop (Ingecoop Worker Cooperative), which emerged as a project of a group of professionals to blend the ideas of cooperativism and associativism with the design of comprehensive solutions in engineering and services; Cooperativa de Trabajo 17 de Octubre (October 17th Worker Cooperative), specializing in the construction of sewer systems and water grids; Cooperativa de Trabajo Tiluchis (Tiluchis Worker Cooperative), which offers general construction services; Janjetic Brothers, which sells chemical and construction products wholesale; and Cooperativa de Trabajo Servicoop (Servicoop Worker Cooperative), specializing in maintenance and remodeling services.

In-depth interviews at these organizations enabled us to look into each one's possibilities or potential intention to participate in the RCC, their histories and internal organization, as well as their strengths and difficulties. With this overview, we began to imagine the concrete objectives that the RCC would have as a space for reinforcing these organizations.

In the next stage, we invited the different organizations to a meeting. One of the main objectives was for them to get to know each other and talk about the potential for the RCC's development. The organizations exchanged their points of view about different topics, for example, how they handled commercial relations, their strengths and weaknesses, and the services that each one offered. At the end of the meeting, we reflected on the possibility of articulating services jointly. Some of the agreements that the participants reached collectively at this first meeting were:

- To run the space collectively among the interested participants, and to organize plenary meetings at intervals of no less than two months.
- To prioritize work within the RCC in order to reduce overall downtime, with the aim of achieving steady work for everyone and meeting our customers' needs without compromising quality standards or effective job management.

- To set standards and define mechanisms for building up members' management, organizational, and institutional capacities.
- To design tools for increasing the collective's sales.

We believe that the integration of the RCC, which was achieved at this first meeting, represents in and of itself a far-reaching outcome. The formulation of the agreements mentioned above began to give the RCC a recognizable identity, which represents a first step toward the consolidation of this space that we have been developing steadily. However, we also consider it relevant to share other types of results that have been taking shape within this project. For one thing, collective management has generated joint work for RCC members. Among the commercial instruments that we have used for this purpose are virtual platforms of construction-related job requests and offers. The proposal made to SMES and collectives that belong to the network has been to participate in these spaces as one way to generate work for the organizations, on a trial basis, with an eye to creating a platform of its own for the RCC, with similar characteristics but adapted to the idiosyncrasy of the SSPE.

Secondly, as a collective, we have taken part since July 2017 in the Ronda de Negocios Multisectorial de La Matanza (La Matanza Multisectorial Business Roundtable).⁴ This is a space for holding business meetings with representatives of the business sector, based on their specific interests, and it has enabled participating companies to make contracts, identify potential buyers of their products or services, make business deals, and establish strategic business alliances at the local and regional levels. The participation in the Business Roundtable has proven to be very useful for the RCC, to make itself known as a productive network and engage with potential customers.

Finally, we have made progress in designing RCC's own graphics thanks to the contribution of expert professionals and as a result of dialogue among the interested parties themselves. This provides the RCC with a distinctive identity and strengthens the ties among the member organizations.

4. La Matanza is a locality in the inner ring of the Buenos Aires metropolitan area, known for its concentration of businesses and factories from the construction sector.

THE EXAMPLE OF THE RED TRANSDISCIPLINARIA DE COOPERATIVAS DE TRABAJO DE SERVICIOS PROFESIONALES (TRANSDISCIPLINARY NETWORK OF PROFESSIONAL SERVICE WORKER COOPERATIVES)

In early 2016, we forged an alliance between two cooperatives of professionals, Tava and Factorial, which allowed them to improve their relations with cooperatives of professionals from other sectors in different provinces around the country. The purpose of this space for exchange is to integrate a transdisciplinary network of professional service worker cooperatives, some of which focus on the same discipline, while others are made up of an interdisciplinary work team.

The Network of Professional Service Worker Cooperatives (RCTPS, in its initials in Spanish) came to be, as in the previous example, as a result of a participatory research project, formulated and developed together with the Tava Cooperative and professionals from the Universidad de Tres de Febrero. The objectives laid out in the project consisted of reinforcing and extending worker cooperative networks and the ties among the different cooperatives; opening an exchange space for joint formation and training; developing joint knowledge as a valuable resource for formulating shared work plans; and creating a new foundational exchange space for the cooperatives.

One of the pillars that sustained this project was the conviction that the specialized development of professional services for worker cooperatives requires long-term professional learning and specialization to generate specific know-how. This makes for a twofold challenge: Creating special technical tools for offering services that meet the worker cooperatives' needs in the areas of engineering, architecture, economics, communication, sociology, psychology, among others; and generating these tools in a collective work space, since as professionals committed to the development of the SSPE, we need to be part of it ourselves.

This dual belonging to the university and professional field, on the one hand, and to the worker and cooperativist sector, on the other, was one of the characteristics shared among the associates of the cooperatives that make up this project. These cooperatives are: Cambalache Cooperativa Geográfica (Cambalache Geographic Cooperative), a geography-based project inspired in the dissemination and connectivity of this science, which has grown out of

the interdisciplinarity, experience, and interaction of those who have developed it; *Cooperativa de Trabajo Gestionar* (Gestionar Worker Cooperative), which offers professional consulting and advisory services, diagnoses, and other services related to the accounting-economic-financial, social, legal, and technical areas for public and private entities; *Estudio Cooperativo Contable de Rosario* (Cooperative Accounting Studio of Rosario), which provides accounting services, tax advice, institutional, economic, and financial consulting; and training for social organizations, cooperatives, producers, startups, and workers within the SSPE; *Camba*, a cooperative technological company that develops customized software; *Cooceplad*, a worker cooperative made up of economists who focus mainly on field work for economic planning theory; *Entropía*, a cooperative of psychologists that at the time was still in the process of forming; and the *Ingecoop*, *Tava* and *Factorial* cooperatives, which we have already presented.

The research consisted of two overall stages. The objective of the first stage was to explore the general characteristics within the cooperatives with respect to management and organization: work remuneration schemes, project distribution, interdisciplinary, and inter-cooperative work. It is worth mentioning that it was the cooperative partners themselves who decided which issues to focus on. The second stage centered on implementing a reflection space among the cooperatives to discuss the problems that they had identified themselves; to this end, four problematization sessions were held to look at the topics on the agenda. These sessions were organized as workshops for exchanging information, experiences, and debating issues related to the aspects mentioned above. The planning of each of the meetings is presented in Table 8.1.

The results of this project were associated, on the one hand, with the reinforcement of the networks in the shared work plans, which were elaborated by the cooperatives in the work dynamics during the meetings. We consider it a sign of the meetings' success that the participating cooperatives have appropriated the space as a place of exchange and formation.

Table 8.2 briefly summarizes some of the discussions that took place at the meetings, which will spark many others that we will have in the near future within the framework of the Network of Professionals' cooperatives.

TABLE 8.1 MAIN POINTS DEBATED IN THE PROBLEMATIZATION SESSIONS OF THE NETWORK OF PROFESSIONAL SERVICE WORKER COOPERATIVES

Points of Debate	
Session 1	Why did we organize as a worker cooperative? How are decisions made in the cooperative? Are there different levels of commitment among the associates? How are new associates incorporated?
Session 2	Schemes for withdrawing: How does remuneration work in each cooperative? Different withdrawal schemes throughout the history of each cooperative. Short-term sustainability.
Session 3	Long-term sustainability: job profiles, customers/users. Financing, capitalization, budgets, economic planning.
Session 4	Work within the cooperative. Interdisciplinary work between or among cooperatives. Objectives and proposals of the RCTPS.

TABLE 8.2 SUMMARY OF THE DISCUSSIONS AT THE RCTPS PROBLEMATIZATION SESSIONS

Topic	Main points discussed
The political perspective on work	Importance of the person as opposed to capital, concept of the complete person. Democratic organization, joint ownership, participatory decision-making, self-management, and associativism. Other forms of work in opposition to the hegemonic work of the capitalist system.
The planning of cooperative work	How do we generate and distribute work? How do we plan the cooperative's internal organization? How do we generate the governance bodies and tools? How do we apportion the surplus?
Long-term sustainability	Budgeting our work in coordination with the differentiation of the markets and customers we work with. Analysis of the cooperatives' production capacity. The issue of financing. How do we budget our work while bearing in mind the cooperative's cost structure?
Working in and for the SSPE sector	Strategies for promoting the exchange of experiences, concerns and projections. Consolidation of solidarity and community work practices, leading to the transformation of our praxis so that it meets the needs of the territories and actors we work with.

The formal research has concluded, but the ties that were established within the research project have been maintained. In this sense, the cooperatives continue to set goals that aim to continue strengthening the RCTPS. We project the network's growth through the incorporation of new cooperatives, but we also believe that it is essential to maintain the spaces for dialogue

and reflection among the organizations that we form part of, and that these spaces serve to deepen our existing discussions, and to spark new debates. Finally, and following one of the objectives proposed in the fourth meeting, we consider that it is fundamental to make progress in outlining the shared work projects among the different cooperatives that make up this collective.

CONCLUSIONS

Working from within the SSPE to benefit this same SSPE allowed us to understand its issues and challenges, and to test practices, ties and actions aimed at promoting the sustainability and growth of the sector, and in particular of our production projects. Worker cooperativism is broad and diverse; it is not our intention to romanticize this way of working, but we do want to learn about its challenges and objectives and understand that there is more than one way to see ourselves as workers in this capitalist world system. The associated management model, through the joint ownership of business capital by the workers themselves, offers countless strengths that we see over and over again when we analyze cooperatives' management, but these organizational schemes also entail no end of challenges. But if the SSPE presents its workers with challenges, it also offers a wide range of strategies to deal with them. In this chapter, we looked at one of these strategies: the construction of partnership networks.

We understand capitalism not only as a system dedicated to the exploitation and accumulation of capital but also as a way to create subjectivities, divide labor, and relate oppressive forces. As workers, we look for other ways to develop work and create social relations, and we put our faith in collective decision-making, the socialization of means of production, collective leaderships, the construction of democratization processes in our workspaces, and democratic governance as an organizing process. With these ways of proceeding we look to make a break with the concentration of power and the mechanical acquiescence that the capitalist system tries to impose on us.

In this way we build, day by day, a social, solidarity and popular economy in a cooperative work format that combines work and education, rooted in specific territories and communities. The different shared experiences have characteristics in common related to self-managed, associative, and networked labor, along with a strong formational character as a mechanism for

transformation, participation, and incorporation of theoretical and practical tools for reflection and action. The work of creating these partnership networks is not finished yet; these associative and communitarian practices will continue to grow and consolidate with the proliferation of new ties in which solidarity and cooperation will be key factors in transforming the subjectivity of each worker, leading to new transformative dialectics and new knowledge combining know-how and practices.

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