

Cooperatives as Knowledge Ecosystems

*The Integrated Knowledge Transmission
Cycle for Governance, Innovation, and
Sustainability*

by

Nara Stefano

Cooperatives as Knowledge Ecosystems: The Integrated Knowledge Transmission Cycle for Governance, Innovation, and Sustainability

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Preface

Co-operatives have long been examined through the lenses of economic organisation, democratic ownership, collective action, social inclusion and institutional resilience. Each of these perspectives captures an important aspect of the co-operative experience. Yet one question remains less visible: what enables a co-operative to preserve, transmit and renew what it knows?

This question becomes particularly important when continuity depends on knowledge dispersed among people who occupy very different positions in the organisation. Members carry practical and territorial experience. Managers and technical staff develop specialised expertise. Boards work with strategic and institutional information.

Federations, public agencies, research institutions, markets and local communities introduce further sources of knowledge. The viability of the co-operative therefore depends, in part, on its capacity to connect these forms of knowledge without separating them from the democratic and normative foundations that distinguish co-operation from other organisational forms.

The starting point of this book is that the existence of knowledge in an organisation does not guarantee its continuity. Knowledge may circulate without being understood. It may be shared without influencing decisions. Experience may remain concentrated in individuals and disappear during succession.

Technical information may reach the organisation while remaining distant from its members. Practices may become institutionalised and later lose their capacity to respond to changing conditions. The central concern is the movement through which knowledge becomes intelligible, legitimate, usable, retained and capable of being reconsidered over time.

This is why the book works with the broader idea of knowledge transmission. Knowledge sharing remains an essential part of organisational life, where learning depends on exchange, participation and interaction among members. Transmission, however, reaches further. It concerns the continuity of knowledge through different actors, organisational levels and periods of time. It includes the conditions under which knowledge is generated, acquired, shared, received, applied, incorporated into organisational memory and eventually revised.

The Integrated Knowledge Transmission Cycle (IKTC) was developed from this concern. Its purpose is to provide a coherent way to examine knowledge creation, acquisition, sharing, receptivity, application, institutionalisation, and renewal in co-operative organisations. These phases form a connected process rather than an automatic sequence. Their continuity depends on governance, legitimacy, organisational memory, participation and the capacity to translate between different forms of knowledge.

The development of the IKTC also led to a second proposition that became progressively important in the book: co-operatives can be understood as knowledge intermediaries. They occupy an intermediary position between producers, technical expertise, research, extension services, markets, governments, communities and innovation systems.

Yet occupying such a position does not by itself produce collective learning. Intermediation requires translation, selection, interpretation and governance. It raises questions about which forms of knowledge gain recognition, whose experience enters organisational memory and who has sufficient authority to influence how knowledge is used.

For this reason, the book follows multiple methodological approaches. Historical reconstruction, conceptual discussion, organisational analysis, international comparison, bibliometric diagnosis and an applied study of Knowledge Management initiatives in agricultural co-operatives are brought into the same intellectual project. Their purpose is complementary.

History makes continuity and institutional change visible; theory clarifies the nature of knowledge and organisational learning; bibliometrics reveals fragmentation in the existing literature; empirical assessment shows where the passage from knowledge to organisational action becomes difficult; and international comparison places these processes in different institutional settings.

The IKTC should consequently be read as a framework open to further examination rather than as a fixed prescription for co-operative organisations. Co-operatives differ substantially by sector, scale, territory, governance arrangements and institutional environment. A useful model must preserve enough conceptual coherence to permit comparison while leaving room for these differences to matter.

The wider ambition of the book is therefore to place knowledge more firmly in the study of co-operative continuity. If co-operatives are expected to remain democratic while becoming more professional, to preserve identity while adapting, and to respond to digital, environ-

mental, demographic and competitive change, the transmission of knowledge cannot remain an implicit organisational process. It becomes part of the conditions through which co-operation is sustained over time.

Introduction

Co-operatives occupy an unusual organisational position. They combine economic activity with collective ownership, democratic governance, member participation and a normative identity that extends beyond the conventional logic of the investor-owned firm. Their continuity depends on economic viability, yet it also requires the preservation of trust, institutional memory, participation and a recognisable connection between organisational practice and co-operative purpose. These characteristics make knowledge important for co-operatives to operate, adapt and continue to be intelligible to their members.

The current environment makes this issue more demanding. Digitalisation has expanded the volume and speed of information available to organisations. Professionalisation has increased reliance on specialised knowledge. Sustainability and climate pressures require new technical, regulatory and territorial capacities. Generational succession addresses issues related to preserving experience and developing new leaders.

Organisational growth can create distance between management and the membership base, while internationalisation and federated structures add further levels of co-ordination. At the same time, diversity in membership introduces different experiences, languages, expectations and criteria for evaluating organisational priorities.

These developments transform Knowledge Management (KM) from an essentially technical concern into an organisational and institutional problem. Information may be stored in databases, procedures may be documented, and digital systems may improve

access to data; resources acquire organisational value only when people can interpret them and connect them with practice.

In a co-operative, this process carries an additional requirement: knowledge that guides collective decisions needs sufficient intelligibility and legitimacy among stakeholders whose authority does not derive from managerial hierarchy.

Knowledge in co-operatives is distributed. Some of it is technical and formally recorded. Some is tacit and acquired through years of participation. Productive knowledge develops in work and operational experience; territorial knowledge arises from relations with communities, local environments and markets; normative knowledge is connected with co-operative identity, principles and established criteria of conduct.

Strategic knowledge may be concentrated in management, while members retain forms of practical knowledge that remain poorly represented in formal systems. The organisational problem lies in enabling these different forms of knowledge to encounter one another, be interpreted and contribute to collective action.

This is one reason why knowledge sharing and knowledge transmission need to remain conceptually distinct. Sharing concerns the exchange, circulation and socialisation of knowledge among actors. It is essential to learning and co-operation in organisations where meetings, assemblies, communities of practice, informal interaction and peer learning continue to be important.

Transmission refers to a larger organisational process. It asks whether knowledge can move through different actors and organisational levels, survive succession, enter practice, become part of institutional memory and remain available for subsequent reconsideration.

A co-operative may therefore display active knowledge sharing and still experience discontinuity in knowledge transmission. Members may exchange experiences that never become organisational learning. Management may circulate information that remains difficult for the social base to interpret.

Training may take place without changing practice. Documentation may preserve records while failing to retain the reasoning that gave meaning to previous decisions. Institutional memory may become extensive yet too rigid to accommodate new circumstances. These distinctions are central to the argument developed throughout this book.

The existing literature offers important insights into individual parts of this problem. Research has examined knowledge creation, organisational learning, knowledge sharing, transfer, innovation, digital transformation, social capital, governance and information flows.

Studies of agricultural co-operatives have also shown their capacity to connect producers with research institutions, extension services, markets and public agencies. Such work provides important evidence of the role co-operatives play in the movement of knowledge within wider economic and institutional systems.

What remains underdeveloped is an explanation of how these processes fit together. The literature frequently approaches knowledge through one specific organisational outcome or activity: innovation, technology adoption, information exchange, learning, digitalisation or network mediation.

Questions of memory, legitimacy, retention, succession, interpretation and institutional change receive uneven attention. As a result,

different elements of the same organisational problem are often studied through separate conceptual languages.

This fragmentation becomes important when co-operatives are understood as knowledge intermediaries. In agricultural settings, for example, they may connect producers with scientific knowledge, extension services, market intelligence, public policy, digital technologies and territorial experience.

The intermediary position gives the co-operative access to multiple knowledge sources. The quality of intermediation, however, depends on what happens after knowledge reaches the organisation. It has to be selected, translated, interpreted and made usable by actors with different backgrounds and forms of expertise.

Intermediation consequently involves governance. Decisions about what deserves attention, which information is considered credible, whose experience enters organisational records and which indicators guide action are also decisions about knowledge. Technical expertise can expand organisational capacity while creating asymmetries of understanding.

Digital infrastructures can widen access to information while concentrating control over data and interpretation. Formalisation can preserve memory while reducing space for experiential knowledge. Democratic participation can broaden the cognitive base of the organisation, provided participants have meaningful opportunities to understand and influence the knowledge informing decisions.

The Integrated Knowledge Transmission Cycle (IKTC) provides the organising framework for examining these relationships. The cycle comprises seven connected phases: creation, acquisition, sharing,

receptivity, application, institutionalisation and renewal. Each phase addresses a requirement of knowledge continuity.

Creation concerns the generation of knowledge through experience, dialogue, problem-solving and experimentation. Acquisition refers to knowledge entering the organisation from external sources, including markets, research, policy, technology and institutional networks. Sharing concerns its circulation among members, managers, technical staff and other actors.

Receptivity introduces a dimension frequently overlooked in conventional accounts of knowledge flow: knowledge must be recognised, interpreted and considered sufficiently meaningful to influence organisational understanding.

The application concerns the conversion of decisions, routines and actions. Institutionalisation concerns memory, retention and the incorporation of learning into organisational practices. Renewal reopens the process by allowing established knowledge to be reconsidered as circumstances, participants and organisational needs change.

The cycle should not be understood as mechanically linear. Knowledge may move backwards and forwards between phases. Application may generate new knowledge; institutionalisation may reveal the need for further acquisition; new members may challenge assumptions that had become established; changes in markets or regulation may require previously accepted knowledge to be reconsidered. The value of the IKTC lies in making these movements observable and in identifying points where continuity weakens.

This also means that the IKTC places governance within knowledge transmission itself. Governance determines access, authority, trans-

lation, participation and the criteria through which knowledge becomes legitimate. Boards, managers, specialised roles, communities of practice, mentoring arrangements, documentation systems, digital platforms and indicators can all support the cycle.

Their contribution depends on how they interact and on whether they preserve intelligibility, learning and participation. The existence of formal mechanisms alone says little about the quality of knowledge transmission. The model also brings temporality into the discussion. Co-operatives carry histories, memories, values and accumulated experience.

This inheritance provides continuity, particularly in organisations where identity and belonging have institutional significance. Yet continuity cannot be reduced to preservation. Knowledge that remains unchanged while the organisation, its membership and its environment evolve may gradually lose explanatory or practical value. Renewal forms part of institutional continuity: accumulated knowledge remains productive when the organisation retains the capacity to revisit it.

A further concern is cognitive inclusion. Co-operative governance prioritises participation, yet formal inclusion does not guarantee equal influence over organisational knowledge. Differences in expertise, language, access to information, gender, generation, professional position and organisational status can influence whose interpretations become authoritative.

Knowledge transmission raises questions of recognition and legitimacy alongside questions of efficiency. The quality of a co-operative's cognitive life depends partly on whether different forms of experience can enter meaningful organisational discussion. The

argument developed in this book has been constructed through a plural methodological strategy.

Historical reconstruction is used to examine how co-operative identity, organisational continuity and collective learning developed over time. Theoretical discussion brings together KM, organisational learning, governance and co-operative studies. International comparison demonstrates how institutional settings alter the conditions under which knowledge is transmitted.

Bibliometric analysis examines the scientific field itself, identifying thematic concentration and conceptual fragmentation. An applied study of KM initiatives in agricultural co-operatives, using fuzzy modelling, provides an empirical basis for examining discrepancies between expectations and organisational perceptions.

Agricultural co-operatives occupy a particularly important place in this process. They provide the principal bibliometric and empirical setting from which the need for the IKTC is made visible. Their organisational position makes the problem especially clear: they connect productive experience, technical assistance, scientific knowledge, market information, public policy and territorial relations.

At the same time, the book does not treat agriculture as the outer boundary of the framework. Later chapters examine the IKTC in relation to different sectors, institutional environments and contemporary organisational transformations. The structure of the book follows this cumulative logic. Chapter 1 reconstructs the historical development of co-operation, examining identity, institutionalisation and the capacity of co-operatives to preserve continuity under changing conditions.

Chapter 2 establishes the foundations of KM in co-operative organisations and shows why the specific distribution of knowledge among members, leaders, technical staff and organisational structures requires a distinctive approach. Chapter 3 considers the co-operative life cycle, knowledge intensity and changing knowledge requirements as organisations develop.

Chapter 4 turns to governance mechanisms for knowledge transmission, examining the organisational conditions through which knowledge is circulated, interpreted, retained and renewed. Chapter 5 makes the methodological architecture of the book explicit, explaining the combination of history, theory, comparison, bibliometrics and applied research.

Chapter 6 provides a bibliometric diagnosis of KM in agricultural co-operatives and develops the interpretation of co-operatives as knowledge intermediaries, while showing the conceptual fragmentation that limits the existing field.

Chapter 7 presents the empirical origins and formal structure of the IKTC. The fuzzy study reveals discrepancies between expectations and perceptions in KM initiatives and identifies points at which knowledge intermediation loses organisational strength. These results provide the practical basis from which the cycle is organised: creation, acquisition, sharing, receptivity, application, institutionalisation and renewal.

Chapter 8 subjects the model to critical examination through conflicts involving democracy and efficiency, formalisation and flexibility, expertise and belonging, power, legitimacy and the intermediary function of co-operatives.

Chapter 9 examines contemporary transformations, digitalisation, datafication, sustainability, circularity, organisational hybridisation, diversity and intergenerational change, and considers how they alter the conditions of knowledge transmission.

Chapter 10 shows the IKTC in different international environments, examining variations in Europe, Asia, Latin America and Africa and demonstrating how regulation, public policy, territorial networks, federated structures and institutional development alter the functioning of the cycle.

Chapter 11 moves towards future research, organisational implications and public policy, treating knowledge as part of the institutional infrastructure required for resilient co-operative futures. Chapter 12 returns to the architecture of the book as a whole, clarifies the contribution and limits of the IKTC and consolidates the implications of the framework for the study of contemporary co-operation.

The proposition running through these chapters is that co-operative continuity has a cognitive dimension. Organisations persist through legal structures, economic resources and governance arrangements, but their capacity to remain recognisably co-operative also depends on how experience becomes memory, how knowledge becomes intelligible, how expertise is connected with participation and how established learning is reconsidered when conditions change.

The IKTC is intended to make this dimension more visible. It provides a framework for asking where knowledge comes from, how it travels, who can interpret it, when it becomes action, how it is retained and under what conditions it can be renewed.

These questions matter because the future of co-operation will depend increasingly on the capacity to manage complexity without allowing knowledge to become detached from the people, purposes and institutional relationships that give the co-operative form its distinctive character.

Chapter 1

Historical Development of Co-operatives: Experience, Identity and Contemporary Relevance

1.0 Introduction

1.1 From Associative Origins to Modern Institutionalisation

1.2 International Expansion and Diversity of Co-operative Experiences

1.3 Co-operative Identity, Principles and Normative Recognition

1.4 Global Experiences, Contemporary Tensions and Lessons

1.5 Chapter Conclusions

1.0 Introduction

Co-operatives occupy a unique position in modern economic history. Although they are often presented as marginal alternatives to capital-owned firms, this reading is insufficient to explain their longevity, capacity for institutional adaptation and ability to respond to market crises, social exclusion and territorial fragilities. Co-operatives constitute organisational forms that combine economic activity, democratic participation, reciprocity and community commitment.

It is this combination that explains why co-operation reappears, in different historical conjunctures, as a response to the concentration of

economic power, the vulnerability of small producers and workers, and the need to build more inclusive forms of economic co-ordination.

In the twenty-first century, this historical relevance has regained international visibility. The declaration of 2025 as the International Year of Cooperatives, with the theme “Cooperatives Build a Better World”, reinforced the recognition that co-operatives can contribute to sustainable development, territorial resilience and economic inclusion when they combine co-operative identity, adaptive capacity and consistent governance structures.

At the same time, the literature also documents the limits of this historical vitality. The co-operative form remains marked by tensions between democracy and efficiency, participation and professionalisation, solidaristic values and competitive pressures, especially in digitalised, financialised and environmentally unstable contexts.

From this perspective, the history of co-operation matters above all as a privileged field for observing the formation of organisational arrangements combining economic co-ordination, collective belonging and normative orientation.

The persistence of co-operatives in different contexts shows that their importance also depends on the capacity to stabilise principles, reinterpret practices and recompose forms of collective action in response to competitive pressures, regulatory changes and social transformations. In this sense, the historical experience of co-operatives offers an analytical basis for the rest of the book.

This chapter shows that the trajectory of co-operation can also be read as the formation, circulation, preservation and renewal of collective knowledge. Each phase of co-operative expansion involved, to a greater or lesser extent, the stabilisation of principles, the transmission

of values, the constitution of co-ordination mechanisms and the incorporation of productive, associative and territorial forms of knowledge.

From this perspective, the history of co-operation becomes a central analytical dimension for the rest of the book: understanding how co-operatives persist requires understanding how they transform historical experience into organisational memory, learning and adaptive capacity.

The chapter is organised as follows. Section 1.1 examines the transition from associative origins and mutual-aid practices to the modern institutionalisation of co-operation, emphasising the consolidation of principles, rules and enduring organisational forms. Section 1.2 discusses the movement's international expansion and the diversity of co-operative experiences in regional and institutional contexts.

Section 1.3 analyses co-operative identity, its principles, and its normative recognition, showing how values and institutional frameworks contributed to the consolidation of the specificity of co-operation. Section 1.4 addresses global experiences, contemporary tensions and lessons, highlighting challenges present in co-operation today. Finally, Section 1.5 presents the chapter conclusion, explaining why the historical trajectory of co-operatives is indispensable for understanding the centrality of knowledge in the following chapters.

The trajectory and historical experience of co-operation also make it possible to anticipate a dimension that will be developed throughout the book: co-operatives perform an intermediary role between productive knowledge, territorial experience, normative principles and economic requirements. This function is important because co-

operative continuity depends on the capacity to transform distributed knowledge into organisational memory, shared learning and collective orientation for action.

1.1 From Associative Origins to Modern Institutionalisation

Economic co-operation predates industrial modernity. Guilds, mutual aid associations, communal practices for the use of resources and local systems of reciprocity already expressed collective forms of organising work and survival. What the nineteenth century introduced was the formalisation of a modern co-operative grammar, supported by more stable rules of property, governance (Teixeira et al., 2024) and distribution of results.

In this trajectory, the Rochdale Pioneers' experience in 1844 became a decisive institutional reference by synthesising operational principles that would acquire long-term significance: open membership, democratic control, members' economic participation, commitment to education and integrity in transactions (Birchall, 1997; Holyoake, 2014; ICA, 2025).

The historical importance of Rochdale becomes clearer when situated in the social transformations triggered by the Industrial Revolution: the deterioration of urban conditions, the disruption of traditional forms of sociability, market asymmetries and labour vulnerability.

In this sense, modern co-operation brought together a moral critique of industrial capitalism and institutional innovation, connecting immediate material needs to a long-term organisational project.

The subsequent creation of the International Cooperative Alliance, in 1895, expanded this basis by giving transnational scale to co-operative