



# Youth Service Co-operatives: An Experiment in Empowerment

Alexandrine Lapoutte

In this short piece, I reflect on some research I conducted with colleagues on young people, Youth Service Co-operatives (YSCs), and co-operative education which was originally published in the *RECMA-Revue internationale de l'économie sociale* (Lapoutte & Planas, 2022). The research focused on the capacity of YSCs to foster young people's empowerment. Here I share some of the findings of the study, using Ninacs' rope metaphor, then discuss learning in youth co-operatives, and conclude with some reflections on the research experience and wider implications of the findings.

## Youth Service Co-operatives in the Social Solidarity Economy and Youth Empowerment

Youth Service Co-operatives (YSCs) have been developing in France for the past ten years. Co-ordinated since 2018 by *La Fabrique Cooperative*, YSCs are hosted by the *Coopératives d'Activité et d'Emploi* (CAEs), which have the skills to provide legal and entrepreneurial support to the youth co-operatives. In France, 900 young people across 10 regions now participate annually in YSCs. By operating as co-operative enterprises, the YSCs develop both the entrepreneurial and co-operative spirit (Lapoutte & Chevillard, 2020).

YSCs potentially solve many challenges for co-operatives, public policy, and research. On a practical level, they can demonstrate the vitality of the co-operative movement and its links with young people, and in particular, offer a solution to the problem of how to renew the ranks of Social Solidarity Economy (SSE) employees and activists. Youth is also a public policy issue, particularly in terms of inclusion and citizenship, and co-operatives rely on people learning how to engage, be active, and participate. Finally, at an academic level, YSCs tie in with current work on entrepreneurial education. In France, entrepreneurial support ecosystems are mainly focused on individual entrepreneurship and the liberal (capitalist) enterprise model (Chambard, 2020), even in social business. By contrast, the co-operative is a different business model necessitating an alternative, democratic-based approach to entrepreneurship.

The research was interested in seeing if this alternative model, co-operatives specifically, and the SSE more widely, could meet young people's needs and expectations and help to empower them. As we know, young people are sometimes stigmatised as "troublemakers" and are

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increasingly prone to anxiety. Many feel powerless and believe that society does not allow them to show their capabilities (Becquet et al., 2012; Vallerie & Le Bossé, 2006). In the YSC model, young people aged between 16 and 18, accompanied by an economic sponsor and a youth sponsor, practice co-operative entrepreneurship within a short-lived co-operative, through which they offer paid services. Participants learn how to run a co-operative and use co-operative education to develop their business and governance model. Our participants concluded that being in a YSC was empowering overall, and that the SSE offers them opportunities for meaningful involvement and greater equality.

The action research methodology we used took a qualitative approach, interviewing 17 young co-operators and using participant observation across three case studies over five months in the Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes region of France. In our effort to understand if and how YSCs fostered young people's empowerment, we relied on the theoretical concept of individual empowerment, conceptualising it with the metaphor of a rope comprised of intertwined strands. For each strand, a further string metaphor is used, each representing a capability, outcome, or attribute (Ninacs, 2002). In our case, these were participation, skills, self-esteem, and critical awareness.




Our findings showed that two dimensions are particularly well developed in the YSC, participation and skills, whereas self-esteem and critical awareness are evident but to a much lesser extent. Following Ninacs (2002), we used the metaphor of the rope to help us understand our results and the level of empowerment achieved and identified by interviewees.

- **Participation:** “gathering strings” (or having the world on a string). Co-operators experienced democracy as they co-operated on functioning boards. Because of “one person, one vote” and space for debate in decision-making, they dared to speak out.
- **Skills:** “having more than one string to one’s bow”. Co-operators developed many skills useful for activism and their employability: this stretched from service activities (painting, cleaning, etc.), to business management (digital skills, discovery of the various functions/ logistics, etc. of the co-operative) and learning the rules and values for participation. Respondents acknowledged that learning through experience, as well as acquiring useful skills through co-operating, offered skills for their whole lifetime.
- **Self-esteem:** “the heartstring” (or loosening hold on the rope). Co-operators say they feel more able to do things and they esteemed themselves more highly. However, this is still uneven because according to individuals, it is not easy to find time for individual coaching which helped to develop self-esteem.
- **Critical awareness:** “cutting the apron strings”. Critical awareness developed mainly in relation to the situation of the young people as part of a social group. It was clear from our research that young people are critically aware of their own situation; they are thus able to make choices, assert agency, and change stereotypes about youth. Critical awareness is developed within the YSC and the wider SSE as the young people practice and learn about how to co-operative and collaborate with others, but not to the extent where they develop, for example, a critique of capitalism and a commitment to social justice.
- **Financial autonomy:** operating on a “shoestring budget”. In addition, it appears, unsurprisingly, that low pay, which many receive, does not improve the material living conditions of co-operators but they do learn, because of their engagement in the YSC, to be more financially literate.

To continue to explore the extent of empowerment achieved through participation in YSCs, we analysed our research results alongside three different models of empowerment: radical, social-liberal, and neo-liberal (Bacqué & Biewener, 2013). It seems that the YSC is empowered through evidencing elements of all three models (Figure 1), and thus is hybrid: mainly radical (practices of economic democracy and individual empowerment towards social transformation),

social-liberal (help from public partner to compensate market failures), and lastly neoliberal (with market orientation and experience in a professional context, but with solidarity).

Figure 1: Hybrid empowerment in YSC

 <b>Radical</b>	 <b>Social-liberal</b>	 <b>Neoliberal</b>
Bottom-up Individual and collective empowerment Social transformation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Practice of economic democracy</li> <li>• Individual empowerment</li> <li>• Beginning transformation</li> </ul>	State and public policies Population participation Compensate for market failures <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Financial support from local public actors</li> <li>• Help from partners</li> <li>• Access to contracts in a short time</li> </ul>	Market logic Individual responsibility Inserting in a system <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Responsibility, prof experience</li> <li>• No stigmatisation (solidarity)</li> <li>• No poverty management through entrepreneurship (priority to learning)</li> </ul>

## Learning Through Co-operation About Co-operation

YSCs clearly offer a contribution in terms of young people’s empowerment because of the skills that they acquire. In the field of entrepreneurial education, youth co-operatives and co-operators engage in a model of collective entrepreneurship which is distinct from individual entrepreneurship. In this sense, young co-operators acquire a core identity of co-operation based on solidarity but also equality and deliberation, and this offers an alternative to the perceived attributes necessary for participation in the capitalist economy. While co-operative teaching methods are sometimes used to support co-operation and also as a tool for individual success (Chaïbi, 2018), the youth co-operative experience (learning by doing) offers a wide-ranging experiment in social and economic co-operation.

Raising awareness of the co-operative alternative (and difference) among young people is a major challenge for the co-operative movement today, and youth co-operatives appear to offer a promising contribution. They also provide a powerful way of strengthening the entrepreneurial ecosystem for co-operatives, as called upon by the United Nations in 2023.

For practitioners, our research contributes to understanding the importance of the 5th ICA principle (Education, Training, and Information) and of making the co-operative movement more open to young people. It draws the attention of co-operative firms to youth initiatives that are of strategic interest to them in terms of renewal, passing on their practices and revitalising their democratic dynamic. Our research showed that young people are looking for equality, justice, and meaning, and are open to YSCs — they have much to contribute to the co-operative movement. One question is, are co-operatives ready to welcome young co-operators, a question raised by Davidge (2017) who cites legal, practical as well as cultural tensions for pre-18 co-operators engaging with the co-operative movement. And how is that co-operative education pursued in co-operative firms? They may provide inadequate education and training about the importance of democratic member control (Meira & Ramos, 2023).

## Final Reflections on the Project

Capitalism is failing and the social-ecological transition is urgent. It seems from our research that the co-operative model and the learning that co-operators do, can offer a valuable

alternative to young people. Although our findings raised lots of questions about co-operatives and co-operative learning which need to be further investigated, I conclude by reflecting on one of the important implications of the research: how the lack of co-operative education outside of the YSC (especially in compulsory education) makes an engagement in co-operative business models, more challenging.

The co-operative business model is a major issue for young people. YSCs are attractive to young people but for them to be successful, they need a strong commitment in time and finance. The young people interviewed understood that co-operation is not easy, cannot be taken for granted, that it requires rules, and takes practice. Financial considerations may be in tension with educational aspects, to the extent that they may lead to poor member engagement and governance. Although co-operative learning takes place within the YCS co-operative, focused vocational and entrepreneurial training is quite minimal and there is little investment in it. Yet despite these limitations, young people in YSCs are at least practicing co-operative skills and 'learning as they go'.

However, very little is taught on co-operatives and the SSE in schools in France. Although ideas such as solidarity remain in the school system, there is little about applying this to alternative business models such as co-operatives. Instead, schools are also focused on competition and the training of consumers rather than citizens and fraternity (Dubet, 2016; Meirieu, 2023). More co-operation at school would contribute to young people moving into engagement with initiatives such as the YSCs with greater co-operative skills. In France, L'ESPER (L'Économie Sociale Partenaire de l'École de la République) brings together 41 SSE organisations (mutual societies, associations, co-operatives, and trade unions) working in the field of education. L'ESPER supports the creation of SSE enterprises at school by supporting volunteer teachers to introduce the idea and the model. Despite interesting results, only a small number of scholars are involved, and SSE remains poorly integrated into school curricula. At higher education level there are some student co-operatives, but the majority of entrepreneurship education focuses on individual projects.

Education for the growth of co-operatives and the SSE will need a critical space which embraces changing philosophies which value the citizen over the market and are concerned with a more equitable long-term process than short term gains. Our research suggests that there are strong convergences between SSE and young people's expectations, so the SSE might be a vehicle to help us to renew our thinking about social and economic equity in our future world.

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