



Guest Editorial

Worker co-operatives and concern for community: An introduction to the special issue

Introduction: Crisis, Context, and the Co-operative Response

This special issue of the *Journal of Co-operative Studies* analyses worker co-operatives and the community contexts in which they are embedded, asking whether, how, and to what extent these organisations engage with and contribute to their wider communities. By focusing on co-operativism's rootedness in local settings, its solidarity with diverse stakeholders, and its commitment to inclusivity, the issue takes up the concerns articulated in co-operative Principle 7 concern for the community (International Co-operative Alliance, 2015). At the same time, the guest editorial board foregrounds worker co-operatives as a distinctive form of co-operation, critically evaluating their capacity to foster community resilience and drive transformative local change.

Co-operatives have a two-hundred-year history of supporting local communities in times of crisis, and globally, periods of co-operative growth have often coincided with wider socioeconomic downturns. Today's convergence of multiple crises — political, economic, social, and environmental — has renewed attention as to how communities can build more sustainable and equitable economies. In this uncertain landscape, a range of alternative economic practices is being tested, from community wealth building — an approach that connects anchor institutions with local organisations to retain wealth locally (Dubb, 2016) — to the recent growth of community benefit societies (Maddocks, 2019), and the wider expansion of the social and solidarity economy. This expansion has reignited interest in co-operatives, often referred to as “new cooperativism,” and featured in a recent special issue of this journal (Ridley-Duff & O'Shaughnessy, 2022). Alongside an emphasis on multistakeholder governance, practices of commoning, and forms of community-led development, new cooperativism draws on the radical heritage of co-operative movements from the 1970s and 1990s (Ridley-Duff & Bull, 2021; Vieta, 2010; Vieta, 2018). It also builds on long-standing calls to recognise and strengthen diverse economic practices (Gibson-Graham, 1996, 2006), pushing back against the “capitalocentric” framing that defines co-operativism as inevitably falling short (Gibson-Graham, 2003).

Worker co-operatives bring distinctive solutions to social and economic challenges, yet they also reflect a historical pattern: co-operatives often thrive in periods of crisis, when the surrounding economy is in distress. This countercyclical growth was perhaps most visible

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during the co-operative high tide of the 1970s and 1980s — particularly in the UK, where a surge of worker co-operatives emerged amid deep economic turmoil (Thornley, 1981). Some were founded to resist deindustrialisation (Coates, 1981), others to pioneer democratic and ecological practices of work and consumption (Wainwright & Elliot, 1982), and still others simply to create jobs in depressed areas. In these bleak years and through the subsequent neoliberal turn, worker co-operatives found fertile ground. Their contributions to generating social wealth and strengthening local social fabric became widely recognised, to the point that they were incorporated into counter-policies by some local authorities seeking to offset rising unemployment, deep public spending cuts, and market deregulation (Cockerton et al., 1980; Cornforth et al., 1988; Taylor, 1983). In the UK, for example, dozens of Co-operative Development Agencies were established with local government support in the early 1980s to promote worker co-operatives as a response to job losses.

This pattern of countercyclical growth is far from unique to the British context. Globally, worker co-operatives have frequently emerged as adaptive responses to systemic crises. In Argentina, the economic collapse of 2001-02 spurred the rise of *empresas recuperadas* — “recovered businesses” — in which workers occupied bankrupt factories and relaunched them as co-operatives. By 2021, more than 400 such enterprises were operating across diverse sectors, sustained by enabling legislation and grassroots solidarity networks (Vieta, 2020). Italy’s Emilia-Romagna region offers a longer-standing example of a robust co-operative ecosystem, where worker co-operatives flourish within a supportive institutional framework and a culture of mutualism fostered by diverse co-operative associations rooted in distinct historical and political traditions (Lomuscio et al., 2023). In the United States, the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis brought renewed interest in worker co-operatives, particularly among communities marginalised by mainstream economic structures. Municipal initiatives in cities such as New York and Madison have actively promoted worker co-operatives as vehicles of economic democracy and social equity (Sutton, 2019).

These international experiences underscore not only the economic adaptability of worker co-operatives in times of crisis, but also their distinctive orientation toward community. The seventh co-operative principle — concern for community — is not merely rhetorical; it is evident in how worker co-operatives embed themselves in local contexts and pursue social aims that extend beyond the immediate interests of their members. Community-centred approaches such as community wealth building and the social and solidarity economy exemplify how co-operatives are being mobilised as vehicles of local regeneration and economic democratisation, deliberately rooted in place and designed to circulate wealth locally. Yet while such strategies emphasise the expansion of the worker co-operative sector, a more fundamental question remains: how can worker co-operatives contribute to the resilience and development of the communities in which they are embedded? Put differently, how might their impact extend beyond membership to generate wider social value and advance the collective good? It is this question — and the tensions it entails — that animates this special issue.

This concern becomes especially pressing given the contested and plural meanings of “community” itself (Aiken, 2017). Worker co-operatives — particularly those rooted in historically marginalised or economically precarious areas — are uniquely positioned as grassroots institutions that weave together social, economic, and ecological concerns. Their participatory governance structures, local embeddedness, and reinvestment of surpluses into socially useful activity make them fertile sites for experimenting with new forms of democratic localism. Yet the scale and durability of their impact often depend on supportive ecosystems, including municipal policy, access to finance, federative networks, and a cultural infrastructure of solidarity. In this light, worker co-operatives are best understood not in isolation but as part of a wider movement to reconstruct community from below — one workplace at a time — in response to the overlapping crises of our era.

Principle 7 and the Complexities of “Concern for Community”

Worker co-operatives are guided by a set of values and principles that infuse their economic activity with democratic and ethical commitments. These commitments inform their governance and decision-making processes, ensuring that equality, equity, and solidarity – central tenets of the co-operative ethos – are at the heart of daily operations. Of the seven internationally recognised co-operative principles, Principle 7 explicitly states that “co-operatives work for the sustainable development of their communities through policies approved by their members” (International Co-operative Alliance, 2015, p. 85). This principle highlights the idea that worker co-operatives are not solely oriented toward the interests of their direct membership, but are also mandated to serve the wider community, placing social purpose alongside, and at times above, the pursuit of profit.

In practice, however, empirical research shows that adherence to co-operative principles and values is not universal and they are not consistently applied (Novkovic, 2006), even though evidence points to their positive impact on co-operative performance (Novkovic, 2004). The dual socio-economic character of worker co-operatives further complicates this picture, as they must navigate potentially conflicting aims, interests, and values (Langmead, 2016; Novkovic, 2012; Somerville, 2007). This tension often manifests itself in the privileging of principles such as openness, independence, and democratic participation over those deemed more aspirational — namely, concern for the wider community and co-operation beyond the enterprise (Birchall, 2011/2022; Novkovic, 2006). Notably, these outward-facing commitments were only incorporated into the co-operative principles at a later stage in the movement’s history, during the twentieth century (Battilani & Schröter, 2012), which may help explain why they continue to receive less emphasis than inward-facing governance norms.

A further issue is the relative scarcity of fine-grained empirical research into the day-to-day practices of worker co-operatives. This gap has reinforced the perception that such organisations are primarily concerned with their own self-interest, often at the expense of wider community engagement (Langmead, 2016). Yet, where detailed studies have been undertaken, the evidence complicates this view. Ghauri et al. (2021), for example, in exploring the gap between co-operative principles and practices, found that the organisations they studied demonstrated a more embedded and substantive understanding of the community principle than is often assumed. In other words, many worker co-operatives may indeed be enacting “concern for community” in practical and meaningful ways — though these actions are not always visible, formally recognised, or easily captured within conventional evaluative frameworks.

Beyond the interest in co-operative principles themselves, academic research also offers divergent assessments of worker co-operatives’ embeddedness in their communities. On the one hand, proponents argue that worker co-operatives are instrumental in enabling communities to build more sustainable, equitable, and dignified ways of living and working from the ground up (Coraggio & Arroyo, 2009; North & Scott Cato, 2017; Piñeiro Harnecker, 2007; Ranis, 2016). From this perspective, they are viewed as vehicles of grassroots development and as integral components of a broader solidarity economy through which communities can assert greater control over their economic futures. On the other hand, critics have long cautioned against a tendency for worker co-operatives to “degenerate” their democratic and egalitarian values and practices over time, as they face pressures to survive in a competitive market (Cornforth, 1995; Rothschild-Whitt & Whitt, 1986). Over time, many are seen to converge toward the practices of conventional firms, prioritising profitability and efficiency at the expense of their founding social ideals.

What is clear is that greater scholarly attention is needed to understand how worker co-operatives engage with, and impact, communities beyond their own membership. Key questions remain about the extent to which worker co-operatives can generate broader social and economic benefits — such as creating inclusive employment, empowering marginalised groups, strengthening local networks, or advancing sustainability goals — while also maintaining

their commercial viability. Their commitment to fairness, sustainability, and equity, combined with an ethos of inclusivity and solidarity, as well as their integration into wider economic strategies or support structures (such as co-operative federations, municipal programmes, or community development initiatives), has yet to receive adequate academic scrutiny. This special issue seeks to help fill that gap by advancing our understanding of the community-embedded practices and wider societal contributions of worker co-operatives.

Contributions and Thematic Perspectives

Bringing together conceptual, empirical, and exploratory insights, this special issue critically examines the evolving relationship between worker co-operatives and the broader community — however that community is defined. It considers how worker co-operatives, as grassroots, bottom-up alternatives to dominant economic models, draw on their historical embeddedness in place to support communities in navigating the complex and overlapping challenges of our times. The eleven contributions that make up this issue underwent a competitive selection process, which assessed not only the depth of analysis but also the diversity of sectors, regions, perspectives, and formats represented. The final collection comprises five research articles (Artis and N’Goran; Diamantopoulos; Eccher; Hostin-Silva; Sarmiento), three short articles (Emmery; Henry, Lyle, Rios, Urena, and Larson; Manley, Hughes, and Grove-White), and two think pieces (Breugem, Bloemen, and Zegers; Pek & Billiet). Together, these span a wide range of contexts, including Athens, the Ivory Coast, southern Brazil, Rhode Island and Oklahoma in the United States, Bologna and Barcelona in southern Europe, as well as multiple sites across the UK and the Netherlands.

Across these varied contexts, the very notion of *community* emerges as a central theme. Since the concept resists singular or fixed definition (Bauman, 2000), it is unsurprising that contributors interrogate its meanings, reframing its contours and engaging with an interdisciplinary terrain. Their analyses move beyond narrow interpretations of community of place (Aiken, 2017; see Manley, Hughes and Grove-White in this issue) or the strictly “local” to address wider concerns such as inclusivity, citizenship, and care for both peoples and the planet. The papers that follow examine how solidarity is enacted within co-operative practices — sometimes with, and sometimes without, the involvement of families, neighbours, and citizens — ultimately highlighting the potential of worker co-operatives to function as institutions for the common good (Zamagni, 2014).

Theme 1 — Community benefit as mission: Aligning worker and collective interests

The first group of papers challenges the presumed divide between worker and community interests, arguing that community benefit is not a secondary outcome of worker co-operation but its very *raison d’être*. Rather than framing member and community needs as competing, these contributions illustrate how worker empowerment and community wellbeing are deeply interconnected and can be mutually sustaining.

Artis and N’Goran offer a valuable empirical contribution to understanding the socio-economic impact of co-operatives through a rare case study of agricultural worker co-operatives in the Ivory Coast. In a context where research on co-operatives remains sparse, they identify four key dimensions of impact — financial sustainability, community attachment, capacity-building, and material wellbeing — each exposing both strengths and shortcomings in delivering equitable outcomes. The study shows that these co-operatives generate employment, develop infrastructure, and alleviate poverty, particularly in rural areas, yet also raises concerns about their long-term resilience, financial autonomy, and the fairness of benefit distribution. Ivorian co-operatives thus emerge as significant, though far from unproblematic, vehicles for socio-economic inclusion and community development.

In a similar vein, Henry, Lyle, Rios, Urena, and Larson analyse how Principle 7 is interpreted by the Roots of Hope Cannabis Cooperative in Rhode Island. Their study highlights the

creation of intergenerational wealth for Black and Brown communities historically targeted by the over-policing and racism that have defined the war on drugs in the US. Drawing on Black co-operative traditions of community development, the article challenges binary distinctions between workers and community. Interestingly, it employs co-operative inquiry and action research as its methodological framework, raising critical questions about the communities from which — and with which — researchers write, and how the principles of co-operation can be integrated into research practice itself.

Turning to the media sector, Diamantopoulos examines worker co-operatives in journalism, contesting assumptions of self-interest. Addressing a gap in the literature, he shows how such outlets can contribute to political democracy by combining economic viability with editorial independence and a commitment to the public interest, even within a sector dominated by corporate agendas and plagued by market failures. While making the case for the viability of journalism under worker self-management, he also points to the potential of multistakeholder models and inter-co-operation to enhance media co-operatives' community impact, particularly through the involvement of readers and other co-operatives in governance and collaboration.

Taken together, these studies — ranging from farming to cannabis retail to media — demonstrate that thriving worker co-operatives place community benefit at the core of their mission, aligning worker self-management with the advancement of the wider community.

Theme 2 — Community in governance: Embedding inclusivity through stakeholder co-operation

Multistakeholder co-operation has gained increasing recognition as an effective way of embedding concern for the community within co-operatives' activities. However, while the growth of multistakeholder co-operatives has attracted considerable academic attention, the wider possibilities of stakeholder governance — beyond formal multi-owner structures — remain relatively underexplored. This second theme addresses how co-operatives can institutionalise community concern by involving a broader range of stakeholders in decision-making, embedding Principle 7 not only in mission statements but also in governance frameworks and the everyday practices that shape organisational life.

In their think piece, Pek and Billiet examine how single-class worker co-operatives — owned exclusively by workers — can nonetheless incorporate stakeholder participation. Drawing on the stakeholder governance literature, they identify five mechanisms through which community interests can influence decision-making in worker co-operative models. These mechanisms, which range from dedicated stakeholder boards to joint management-stakeholder committees, illustrate how co-operatives can integrate community perspectives into their governance processes without formally converting to multistakeholder structures.

As another example of multistakeholder governance, Sarmiento's paper presents an empirical study of the Oklahoma Food Cooperative, an initiative that brought together producers and consumers to build vibrant, sustainable food communities. Tracing the co-operative's history, he shows how it sought to promote non-capitalist approaches to food, community, and sustainability within a capitalist-dominated environment. These ambitions, however, were gradually undermined by broader structural dynamics — including transformations in the food system and pressures from urban redevelopment — which ultimately contributed to the co-operative's closure after 15 years. The analysis highlights both the potential of co-operatives to bridge divides across class, politics, and sexual orientation, and the difficulties of negotiating tensions among divergent aims. Drawing on critical conceptions of subjectivity, the study emphasises how power relations shape co-operative experiments, with concerns for farmers' livelihoods and affluent consumers often eclipsing commitments to social justice and redistribution. Ultimately, while communities are frequently celebrated as spaces of emancipation and solidarity, Sarmiento demonstrates how they can equally reproduce exclusion.

Theme 3 — Community as becoming: Co-operatives and post-growth economies

This third theme shifts attention from governance structures to rethinking the very meaning of “community.” Informed by post-growth and post-structuralist feminist theory, the papers move beyond static notions of belonging to conceptualise community as *becoming* — an ongoing process of making and sharing worlds. The contributions span platform co-operatives in Bologna and Barcelona that reimagine digital technologies for collective wellbeing; cycle repair co-operatives in England where community and circularity reinforce one another; and Brazil’s Landless Rural Workers’ Movement (MST), which rebuilds communities through land regeneration. Collectively, these studies illustrate how community emerges through situated practices that disrupt capitalocentric logics and privilege interdependence, solidarity, and socioecological justice.

In her ethnographic study of MST co-operatives, Hostin-Silva applies the community economies approach, which rejects capitalocentrism and instead foregrounds diverse economic practices, especially those rooted in care for both people and the earth. Through this lens, she shows how MST co-operatives operate not only as sites of production but also as arenas where ecological regeneration, democratic participation, and economic security are actively cultivated. Central to her analysis is the recognition of often-overlooked quotidian practices — acts of cultivation, co-operation, and collective decision-making — that, while seemingly mundane, underpin the ongoing processes through which community is formed. In this way, MST co-operatives replenish human and more-than-human communities rather than capital, reorienting the very metrics of success toward social and ecological flourishing rather than narrow economic growth.

The second paper engaging with a community economies framework is Eccher’s ethnographic study of platform co-operatives in Bologna and Barcelona. Based on sixteen months of ethnographic research, Eccher positions these initiatives as community economies that reimagine digital technologies for collective well-being. Her analysis highlights how worker-owned platforms enact non-capitalist and ethical practices — such as co-design, democratic governance, and equitable value distribution — that directly contest the extractive logics of the gig economy. In doing so, these co-operatives demonstrate how community can be constituted in digitally mediated contexts through practices that prioritise solidarity, interdependence, and the co-creation of alternative digital futures.

Alongside emphasising co-operatives’ role in building community economies, Emmery’s paper makes the case for their contribution to post-growth strategies. Drawing on qualitative research with cycle repair worker co-operatives in England, she shows how these initiatives foster post-growth economies that privilege sustainability, justice, and democracy over narrow imperatives of growth. Her fieldwork reveals the mutually constitutive relationship between co-operatives and communities: co-operatives generate social and ecological value for their communities, while communities in turn create the conditions that sustain co-operative activity. In this way, the paper underscores both the transformative potential and the tensions involved in reconciling workers’ economic needs with broader socioecological commitments.

Theme 4 — Community wealth: Policy opportunities and constraints for co-operatives

This final theme examines how policy frameworks construct “community” as a strategic object in local economic development. Community wealth building — pioneered in Cleveland in the United States and later adapted in contexts such as Preston in the UK — seeks to anchor wealth locally by fostering supportive ecosystems for co-operatives and other community enterprises. The papers in this section underscore how such strategies can generate opportunities for co-operative growth and local empowerment, while also emphasising the risks of constraining co-operatives’ autonomy, diluting their grassroots character, or instrumentalising them within broader policy agendas.

Breugem, Bloemen, and Zegers critically analyse the structural and cultural barriers that emerging worker co-operatives encounter under community wealth building strategies in the

Netherlands. Their study reveals that, rather than nurturing democratic economic alternatives, policy-makers often instrumentalise co-operatives as quick-fix tools for community engagement or service delivery, bending their missions towards government agendas. Such top-down approaches risk eroding the grassroots, collective character of co-operatives and limiting their transformative potential in local economies. In response, the authors call for public-collective partnerships built on trust and power-sharing, enabling co-operatives to democratise and socialise the economy from the ground up.

In contrast, Manley, Hughes, and Grove-White offer a more optimistic perspective through their discussion of the *Social Value Toolkit*, designed for local authorities engaged in community wealth building in the UK. Using the case of Westminster City Council, their paper demonstrates how a relational conception of social value can be operationalised within local government, moving beyond narrow metrics to recognise democratic governance, local reinvestment, and collaboration as central. In this way, they highlight how worker co-operatives can be more effectively valued and supported in procurement processes — positioned not as instruments of policy, but as enterprises of and for the commons.

Conclusion: Reflections and Future Directions

The contributions to this special issue interrogate the diverse ways worker co-operatives engage with their communities — from local development partnerships to inclusive governance structures and sustainability initiatives. Collectively, they reveal not only the enabling conditions that allow co-operatives to grow the community, but also the contradictions that persist: tensions between member and community interests, struggles to withstand market pressures without eroding democratic integrity, and the risk of being instrumentalised within state or policy agendas. For scholars and practitioners alike, these cases reaffirm both the promise and the fragility of Principle 7's concern for community. Worker co-operatives can serve as sites of solidarity, ecological regeneration, and democratic experimentation, yet their transformative capacity is neither automatic nor assured; it must be actively nurtured, defended, and supported.

Future research must therefore grapple with difficult questions. How can worker co-operatives sustain community “becoming” in the face of competitive markets? What strategies enable them to resist degeneration or co-optation? And which forms of policy, finance, and public support best allow them to operate as institutions of the common good, rather than as tools of austerity or market adaptation?

Our aim in curating this special issue has not been to settle these debates but to open them further. We hope the contributions gathered here provide a foundation for continued inquiry, critical dialogue, and practical experimentation. At the same time, they should serve as a reminder that the emancipatory potential of worker co-operativism is always contested terrain — vulnerable to capture, compromise, and contradiction, yet still offering powerful resources for imagining and enacting more just, democratic, and sustainable communities.

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Guest Editors

Guest Editors' Note

We are indebted to Dr Anita Mangan, Editor of the *Journal of Co-operative Studies*, for her input into the call for papers and her invaluable support to the guest editorial team. We would also like to thank Jan Myers for her contribution to reviewing the final version of this special issue. Finally, we are grateful for the level of positive responses this call for papers received, the many researchers and practitioners who submitted papers, but also all those who generously peer-reviewed academic articles.

The Guest Editors

Dr Malu Villela is a lecturer in management at Essex Business School, University of Essex. Her research critically examines alternative organisational and economic models for inclusive and sustainable economies, with a particular focus on democratic governance, community-led organising, and co-operative approaches to digital technology. Dr Eleonore Perrin is a postdoctoral researcher at Queen's University Belfast. She is a co-operative practitioner and researcher, having worked with worker co-operatives in Northern Ireland for more than 10 years. Dr François Deblangy recently graduated from the University of Rouen-Normandy. His research focuses on the social and sociopolitical history of British workers' co-operatives and other related areas such as social and working-class movements, workers' control and industrial democracy. Dr Emre Sahin is an assistant professor at the Institute of Social Studies and the Department of Political Sciences at Rojava University, Syria, and also serves as department coordinator in the Sociology of Education MA programme at Kobane University. His research centres on social movements and contemporary political sociology, particularly prefigurative mobilisation and women's autonomy.

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