



Emerging co-operatives in Amsterdam: The role of collaborative culture and institutional support

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This article explores the challenges of establishing worker co-operatives in the Netherlands, drawing on experiences working with emerging (worker) co-operatives and municipal institutions working on community wealth building (CWB) in Amsterdam. As solutions, this article highlights the central role of communities, the need for trust and support from local institutions, and the importance of support organisations that facilitate collective co-operative processes.

Introduction

The collective must be restored. Decades of neoliberalism have eroded democratic capacities and the social fabric of societies, leaving behind a public and democratic wasteland (Putnam, 2000). The reign of globalised markets has disrupted communities, disembedding them from their economies (Guinan & Hanna, 2017). This has largely reduced society to a mass of atomised individuals imbued with a neoliberal subjectivity, seeing themselves and others as self-reliant, competitive, and responsible for their own success or failure, rather than as members of a community or collective society (Harris & Jervis, 2024).

In this article, we follow the concept of community as presented by Morrow et al. (2019). A community is not merely a set of relationships in a limited location. While this commonality is important, a more significant concept is the idea of “being-in-common” — the individual is always connected to others (Nancy, 1991). Community fosters mutuality and co-dependence, and from this perspective, community values can guide economic decisions, highlighting collective desires and ethics over individual drivers (Popke, 2010).

Community members can make up collectives to create crucial decision-making units in our societies (Etzioni, 1988). The collective — whether an association, co-operative, community centre, mosque, church, sports club, or another community-led organisation — fosters joint decision-making and a solidaristic, democratic ethic. Furthermore, the collective establishes an intermediary, alleviating the power asymmetries the individual suffers in relation to the state and dominant economic actors. Worker co-operatives are part of these political and economic

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intermediaries and counter-powers that make up stable democratic economies and societies. Worker co-operatives, as well as other democratically owned enterprises, specifically provide collectives with economic power, as these give workers a say and ownership over their means of provisioning.

Building Community Wealth in Amsterdam

In Amsterdam, worker co-operatives are gaining traction as the municipality of Amsterdam has committed to community wealth building (CWB) in three city areas. CWB is an economic strategy, originally pioneered in Cleveland, USA, and later in cities like Preston in the UK, to create a local, democratic economy by redirecting procurement and financing to locally owned enterprises and co-operatives specifically. In Amsterdam, this approach is adopted both bottom-up as well as top-down, as it has been embraced by parts of the municipality and has slowly been spreading across communities in the city.

Various factors motivate community members in Amsterdam to pursue change in their neighbourhoods: from dissatisfaction with untidy surroundings, to a deep sense of social commitment to their community, or the desire for improved financial wellbeing. Against this background, civil society and community-based organisations are promoting the concept of CWB and worker co-operatives through assemblies and other means. Civil servants seek to connect with existing local community-based initiatives to initiate new worker co-operatives. Our organisation, Commons Network (<https://www.commonsnetwork.org>), has worked together with these community initiatives in collaboration with the municipality to support their establishment and development. We encountered numerous challenges for these communities during our work, which we will discuss below.

Challenges

Despite a longstanding tradition of mostly agricultural co-operatives in the Netherlands, worker co-operatives remain largely unfamiliar to the public. There exists only a limited understanding of their principles and operational structures. Furthermore, institutions are not designed to support and enable co-operatives. We have encountered various challenges that complicate the setting up of co-operatives, including a lack of co-operative skills and co-operative support systems, as well as challenges regarding social benefits and tendering.

Lack of co-operative skills

It takes time, effort and resources for members of a worker co-operative to learn how to work collectively and in solidarity with each other and their organisation (Parnell, 2021). With regards to skills, we have found that in communities in Amsterdam, there is sometimes a lack of knowledge on how to democratically organise and collectively run a business, fully harnessing the potential of collaboration. A key strength and challenge is commitment to democratic decision-making which requires specific collaborative processes and the skills to facilitate and carry out these processes. It requires the difficult task of building and maintaining a collaborative culture.

We have seen emerging worker co-operatives struggle with managing a dominant personality within the group who appropriates decision-making roles, or spending excessive time trying to figure out how to compensate for a lack of financial expertise within their group. When challenges arise, some automatically look for a traditional manager to make decisions, rather than embracing their new role in shared decision-making. This is not to be blamed on community members themselves — it reflects a neoliberal mentality which has resulted in unlearning how to co-operatively relate to one another.

This mentality is not only present within emerging worker co-operatives, it is also visible in the work of civil servants working with CWB programmes. While municipal support can provide an

initial boost to emerging worker co-operatives, it also imposes external pressures and deadlines that may not align with the organic growth and long-term sustainability of these initiatives. To be able to advance CWB within the municipal body and, for example, meet political agendas, we have seen that democratic and collective processes may receive less attention as there is a focus on getting emerging worker co-operatives operational. Whilst this speeds up the development of the co-operative, it can also be argued that it encourages emerging worker co-operatives to adopt structures that are not as democratic and worker-owned. This reflects a mentality that disregards the role of the community, ultimately undermining core co-operative principles.

Lack of support systems

Working together co-operatively is a process that is learned through practice, exchange, and training. While CWB policy programmes encourage the development of worker co-operatives and aim to push procurement into the worker co-operative's direction, community members experience a lack of structural support and training for their emerging worker co-operatives, including getting them procurement-ready.

While civil servants have an understanding of local and social entrepreneurship and commoning, there is simply a lack of knowledge on how to properly support worker co-operatives. For instance, support with tailored business advice on internal co-operative governance and the facilitation of collective processes is yet to be developed. Some community members know that CWB programmes have received municipal money to help build co-operatives, yet fear this money is spent on expensive advisors. At times, plans and decisions regarding co-operative projects are communicated only after they have been finalised — leading to untailored support and frustration. The financing ecosystem is also missing, as traditional investors, banks, and/or impact investors are not familiar with co-operative businesses and therefore are ill-equipped or unwilling to finance them. As such, the ecosystem needed to properly support co-operative businesses is simply still quite underdeveloped.

Fear of losing benefits

Another challenge for emerging worker co-operatives is the structure of the social security system. The efforts regarding facilitating the emergence of worker co-operatives are focused on underserved neighbourhoods in Amsterdam, where there is a great deal of poverty and unemployment. The idea is that these worker co-operatives also offer an avenue for people to (re)enter the labour market. While the Netherlands maintains a strong welfare state that offers considerable support to individuals relying on benefits, there is a widespread fear of potentially losing social benefits.

Some welfare benefits are lost when someone rejoins the labour market and are not easily reacquired when quitting. This makes welfare recipients hesitant to join an unfamiliar and newly established worker co-operative. At present, falling back on benefits in the case of the worker co-operative's failure is administratively difficult to arrange due to structural mistrust of citizens built into the policies. Recent governmental failures — such as the wrongful accusations of fraud against thousands of families — have resulted in cases of severe financial hardship. This has exacerbated the fear of making mistakes and losing benefits.

Tendering issues

The municipal tendering process is another obstacle. One key part of CWB is a re-directing of public finances towards community wealth. One way to achieve this is by having worker co-operatives take on services such as cleaning, building, or catering that are procured by the city. The current municipal tendering process, however, constitutes a challenge as it is not set-up for this purpose. Competing for a tender from public institutions requires adherence to extensive regulatory conditions and paperwork. Traditional and larger companies are well-versed in the tendering process and possess the expertise needed to navigate it effectively,

giving them a competitive advantage in securing tenders. Furthermore, a company has a better chance when able to provide a track record, which disadvantages emerging worker co-operatives that have not been able to build one. While steps are being taken to adjust procurement — for instance, regarding the Right to Challenge which allows communities or organisations to take on public service assignments, or the more flexible interpretation of conditions for procurement to include smaller co-operatives (Sandford, 2015, Vereniging van Nederlandse Gemeenten, 2024) — there still appears to be a lack of trust and commitment to follow through these steps. The approach of public-collective partnership has been making headway, where authorities see communities, or co-operatives, as potential and legitimate partners to deliver services or maintain public resources (Milburn & Russell, 2019). This can take many different forms but is primarily an attitude or perspective on the role of the collective in our societies. Even though these developments do take place, they are relatively marginal and continuously require struggle to receive support and acknowledgement.

A Path Forward: New Roles and New Institutions

Moving forward requires a socio-cultural change, both within communities and emerging co-operatives, as well as within the municipality. If the municipality is indeed keen on rolling out CWB programmes and building community wealth, it requires local authorities to rethink their role — not just as facilitators, but as active agents in the fostering of a blooming co-operative ecosystem. Their support should include mechanisms in procurement policies that enable worker co-operatives to secure public tenders. Furthermore, safety nets should allow individuals to revert to welfare benefits if their co-operative enterprise fails, and accessible financing avenues for co-operatives should be created. Altogether, this would mitigate perceived financial risks and encourage wider participation in co-operatives. However, the success of worker co-operatives cannot be reached by policy adjustments alone. Perhaps even more crucial is the socio-cultural change and institutional trust towards community practices.

Behind these challenges, the underlying issue is the lack of recognition of the essential role that communities play in our economies and societies. This has resulted in the erosion of collective and co-operative skills, as well as a disregard for locally-rooted communities by municipalities. To address this, a broader social change needs to happen. Yet specifically regarding CWB projects and policies, we have two suggestions to make these projects and the development of worker co-operatives successful.

First, we need an ecosystem grounded in the view of humans as co-operative beings. This means rejecting the assumption that rational self-interest and the profit motive are the sole or primary drivers of human behaviour. A co-operative ecosystem must embrace the idea of humans as naturally co-operative, rather than reinforcing neoliberal subjectivities. Without this shift, co-operatives are at risk of degeneration (Harris & Jervis, 2024). Accordingly, when CWB policies lead to the creation of co-operative support organisations, these organisations must be shaped by a co-operative, solidaristic, and democratic ethic. They should actively foster long-term co-operative skills such as democratic decision-making, collective ownership, and shared responsibility. Crucially, community members should not be merely assisted by civil servants but empowered and supported by trusted peers from within the co-operative ecosystem — individuals and groups who have taken on larger, more autonomous roles in sustaining and developing worker co-operatives.

Second, the model of public-collective partnerships should be taken more seriously. Intermediaries such as community-owned enterprises, associations, and community groups should not be seen solely as market actors, but as democratic entities with inherent legitimacy, indispensable to economic decision-making. In line with this acknowledgement, these actors should be given a central place in shaping our economies, ensuring that economic activity is embedded within communities. Without this central role, communities will lack the space and support needed to develop their initiatives into functioning worker co-operatives or collectives

capable of resisting extractive market forces. Public-collective partnerships offer a key avenue for enabling communities to take on this role.

In conclusion, we argue that a community is not merely a group in need of assistance or another market player, but a capable, legitimate entity when operating in the right societal ecosystem. A community can build worker co-operatives, which can function as a collective intermediary and decision-making bodies between individuals, the state, and the market. Rebuilding this collective is a structural necessity, as it creates the social and political spaces where communities can reclaim agency, solidarity, and democratic participation. In doing so, it allows for the re-embedding of the economy within communities, fostering a more democratic and equitable society.

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