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**Co-operatives and  
Three-Dimensional Sustainability**

CAROLIN SCHRÖDER

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UNIVERSITY OF  
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Centre for the  
Study of Co-operatives

## CO-OPERATIVES AND THREE-DIMENSIONAL SUSTAINABILITY

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# CO-OPERATIVES AND THREE-DIMENSIONAL SUSTAINABILITY

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## INTRODUCTION

**C**O-OPERATIVES NOT ONLY PROMOTE SHARED INTERESTS and objectives, but also contribute actively to the shaping of their local environments. And as the co-operative movement boasts a comparatively large number of supporters worldwide, they may — and this is the underlying assumption of this paper — substantially contribute to a socio-ecological transformation on the local, national, and global levels. While co-operatives offer promising conditions for an economically, socially, and ecologically sustainable future, this text argues — from an interdisciplinary perspective — that there are several empirical flaws as well as theoretical and practical challenges to the sustainability of co-operatives. This text should be perceived as a trigger for discussion on co-operatives and sustainability rather than a comprehensive analysis of specific co-operatives or sectors.

It begins with a short overview of arguments found in the literature regarding the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainability in the context of co-operatives. There is an important distinction between the intra- and supra-organizational levels, as the concept of sustainability under discussion here is understood as a three-dimensional, multi-level arrangement. A later section of the paper examines the special, perhaps unique, approach to co-operatives in Germany, and details, in particular, co-operative approaches to climate protection.



## “CO-OPERATIVES AS A COLLECTIVE PURSUIT OF SUSTAINABILITY”<sup>1</sup>

Although economic and social viability as well as the preservation of natural resources were major reasons for establishing the first co-operatives, the founders of the (modern) co-operative movement probably did not use the term “sustainability.” But since the International Co-operative Alliance’s (ICA) adoption of the seven core values and principles in 1995 and even more so in the wake of 2012, the United Nations International Year of Co-operatives, “sustainability” has become a term and concept the international co-operative movement relates to explicitly.

The ICA defines sustainability as “the capacity to support, maintain or endure” by integrating environmental, economic, and social dimensions (ICA 2013, 16). Emphasizing these three elements connects them to the so-called three-pillar model used in sustainability studies and a vast literature discussing the (im)possibilities of implementing sustainability.

The co-operative literature reveals essays and case studies from different parts of the world arguing in favour of the mainly economic and social, but since the early 1990s also environmental, added values of co-operatives in many sectors, with the majority being in finance, agricultural production, and consumer services. A considerable amount of literature also questions those added values. For the sake of clarity, I will start with the positive attributions made in theory, as the reflections on practical implementation will raise problems and questions.

With the ICA’s emphasis on sustainability as a “collective” pursuit, the question comes to mind what the specifics might be. While there are some connections between co-operative studies and organizational studies, there are not many references yet to participation research, to research on social movements and — what might be of specific interest in the context of sustainability — to lifestyle research. Within that line of thought, let’s start off with a brief overview of aspects of economic, social, and environmental co-operative sustainability.

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1. International Co-operative Alliance, *Blueprint for a Co-operative Decade* (Geneva: International Co-operative Alliance, 2013), 14.

### **The Economic Sustainability of Co-operatives**

On the organizational (micro) level, there is some empirical proof that co-operatives are more resilient in times of financial and economic crises than other forms of organization. It can also be assumed that their average stability is higher (across sectors) than that of other forms of organization under company law (Atmaca 2014; Sanchez Bajo and Roelants 2011). Owing to their specific business model rooted in the basic principles of self-help, shared objective(s), and joint and several liability, co-operatives are also being conceived as “more efficient than investor-owned businesses” (ICA 2013, 14; cp. Chevallier 2011) and less likely to face crashes and bankruptcy as they emphasize “stakeholder value” rather than “shareholder value” (Atmaca 2014). They are said to be able to embrace longer planning horizons and reduce business implementation costs.

On the local, regional, and even national and global (meso and macro economic) levels — and in consequence of the attributes mentioned above — co-operatives contribute to the stabilization of the number of businesses/SMEs and regional economies by diversifying the range of businesses and ownership forms (ICA 2013, 15; Sanchez Bajo and Roelants 2011, 111; Brockmeier 2007, 638–57); they contribute to national GDPs,<sup>2</sup> and provide employment to local communities.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Social Sustainability of Co-operatives**

On the organizational level, co-operatives are considered to be socially sustainable, with their basic principles of participation, identity, and collective responsibility (including trust and solidarity) being major characteristics (cp. Atmaca 2014; Bonus 1994, 45–46). For their members, co-operatives address everyday needs while sharing resources, knowledge, and economic power. They are additionally assumed to integrate multiple perspectives, to facilitate co-operation and collective action, to build communities, to provide capacities for communication, training, and education, and even to reduce inequalities

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2. According to a conservative estimate, “the aggregate turnover of co-operatives in [the ten biggest economies of the world] is [in 2008] ... just under 5 percent of the aggregate GDP of this group of countries” (Sanchez and Roelants 2011, 105).

3. Adding to the numbers of direct employment in co-operatives are indirect employment or self-employed activities that depend on transactions with a co-operative (Sanchez and Roelants 2011, 108).

(Gonzales 2007; Maury 2009, 1). Another specific appeal of co-operatives, often alluded to, is their successful adoption of various forms of collective decision making (cf. Hanel 1992; cf. Flieger 1996, 33).

Positive contributions beyond the organizational level might include adding to a society's social capital, offering solutions for a variety of social problems, and delivering various socio-cultural services, especially via "social co-operatives," while putting "human needs and utility ... [including physical health] ... at the centre of their organizational purpose" (ICA 2013, 14f; cp. Atmaca 2014; Valentinov 2004) to increase the empowerment of marginalized groups as well as to stabilize local communities and environments (Gonzales 2007). While there is substantial proof that co-operatives contribute to education, further assumptions are that the co-operative movement facilitates or even actively supports solidarity and identity and allows for a comparatively broad civic involvement in local and regional decision-making processes and local communities by creating links between producers, distributors, and customers, among co-operatives, and with other public and private sector organizations.

### **The Environmental Sustainability of Co-operatives**

The preservation of natural resources is not new to co-operatives either. On the organizational level, it can be conceived as the careful management of soil/land, water, air, trees, and livestock in order to run a collective business; on the supra-organizational level, it provides a basis for the maintenance of health and welfare of human beings. The preservation of natural resources has been a major issue in the agricultural, forestry, and fishery sectors. But only since the 1990s have publications described and analyzed the environmental aspects of co-operatives, conceiving the preservation of nature and the stabilization of biodiversity as values in themselves (Saxena 1995).<sup>4</sup> Today, one can find a large number of case studies on the environmental sustainability of co-operatives.

### THREE-DIMENSIONAL CO-OPERATIVES AND MULTI-LEVEL SUSTAINABILITY

A comparatively small number of publications has provided explicit connections between co-operatives and the term "sustainability," despite the fact that there are

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4. Saxena stated in 1995 that "on the whole, however, it seems true to say that co-operative movements are generally apathetic to ... the subject of saving [the] environment" (77).

many interesting examples of this to be found all over the world. Nonetheless, the business reports of individual co-operatives as well as the *World Co-operative Monitor* provide substantial proof of the economic sustainability of co-operatives. Some co-operatives voluntarily publish reports on social and/or environmental sustainability or use standardized sustainability scorecards.<sup>5</sup>

As indicated, publications on the issue are far from comprehensive. One problem is that each dimension may encompass many different aspects, and this makes it difficult to grasp even one of the economic, social, and environmental dimensions. There is a vast literature for each of the three dimensions, which in addition are embedded in different academic disciplines, discourses, and schools of thought — for example, the solidarity economy, the green economy, community development, regional development, and growth and post-growth studies.<sup>6</sup>

What makes it difficult to implement either economic, social, or environmental sustainability is the fact that criteria for most aspects of it are not always clear, and in many — if not most — cases cannot be measured in numbers. Some things, of course, can be counted quite easily — economic aspects such as GDP and market share, employment numbers and ratios, the percentage of women in boards, the amount invested in green or social projects, the number of projects supported, and the number of members using each product.<sup>7</sup> Other things are more difficult to assess — for example, the longevity of co-operatives,<sup>8</sup> collective wealth, the capacity to innovate or adapt to change (cp. Sanchez and Roelants 2011, 109). And even trickier to measure are indicators for elements such as effective participation in co-operatives, social capital (and which form of it), community engagement and inclusion or exclusion, and (different concepts of) justice and equality. On a more abstract level, one could ask which human relations are assumed and why, and which timespans are to be covered while speaking of long(er)-term outcomes (cp. Tainter 2000).

Adding to these assessment problems is the fact that co-operatives may not be ready or willing to give insight into basic environmental and social indicators such as resource

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5. Quarter et al. 2007.

6. The fact that co-operatives, with their multiple dimensions of values and principles, are highly values based (as is sustainability) doesn't make it easier.

7. See [http://www.cooperativedifference.coop/assets/files/Atlantic\\_Cluster/Project\\_A1\\_/Scorecard\\_Pamphlet\\_Draft\\_3.pdf](http://www.cooperativedifference.coop/assets/files/Atlantic_Cluster/Project_A1_/Scorecard_Pamphlet_Draft_3.pdf), <http://seward.coop/coop/scorecard>, and [http://www.corporateknights.com/wp-content/reports/2014\\_Sustainable\\_Co-ops.pdf](http://www.corporateknights.com/wp-content/reports/2014_Sustainable_Co-ops.pdf). Accessed 11 November 2014.

8. Sanchez and Roelants (2011) indicate that there are some studies on the longevity of co-operatives, and comparative data on the length of residency in German housing co-operatives exists as well (Atmaca 2014).

productivity, employee turnover, and workplace injuries (Quarter et al. 2014). An additional issue is the absence of national or international co-operative frameworks for disclosure/transparency (Tainter 2000).<sup>9</sup>

### **Sustainability and Complexity**

These challenges, including the lack of transparency, are not a problem specific to co-operatives but to sustainability research in general. For one thing, discussions on both co-operatives and sustainability are to a great extent value-based; for another, the lack of empirical data beyond singular case studies to prove the positive contributions co-operatives make to sustainability (ICA 2013, 18), especially regarding the social and environmental dimensions, reinforces the tendency to mix singular experience with overall assumptions. This is echoed by the fact that one can find little empirical evidence on the three dimensions within co-operatives, and there are also few writings on the concept of sustainability in the co-operative context.

With these questions and challenges in mind, one still has to state that the above-mentioned aspects of co-operative economic, social, and environmental sustainability are only one-dimensional. According to established academic discourses and the self-concept of the co-operative movement, achieving sustainability means nothing less than integrating these dimensions within both individual co-operatives and the co-operative movement as a whole, as part of global society, i.e., within multi-level arrangements. This adds considerably to the complexity of any transition process towards more sustainability (cp. Espinosa and Porter 2011; Harris 2007). It also indicates why the distinction between internal and external aspects may be important.

One major challenge for every co-operative aiming for (more) sustainability lies in the reasonable and sensitive combination of two or three dimensions. In this context, special attention must be paid to the fact that sustainability objectives might not simply add up in a positive way; there may be multiplying, overlapping, reversing, or rebound effects as well.

Although this might sound too complicated to achieve, many co-operatives already successfully integrate two or more dimensions. The integration of *economic and social*

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9. An exception is — according to the report mentioned in footnote 7 — the Canadian Co-operative Association's framework to improve environmental performance.

*dimensions*, for example, is inherent in the co-operative movement. This starts with the equitable sharing of costs and benefits (economic democracy), the “luxury of growing slowly, [with a focus] on long-term thinking,”<sup>10</sup> and results in frequent co-operative activity in sectors with low rates of return on capital and slower growth at the organizational level. This may lead to less exploitation, better access to and better quality of goods and services, and thus less daily struggle among members for income, housing, food, etc. (cp. ICA 2013, 14).<sup>11</sup> At the macro level, one can find a prominent example of the economic and social dimensions of co-operative sustainability in the fight for humane working and living conditions that shaped the public perception of co-operatives most prominently in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. More recent examples include financial services for lower-income households and socially responsible investment products.<sup>12</sup>

Similarly, on the national and global levels, examples of *economic and environmental dimensions* are present mainly in the context of discussions on “greening economies,” green investments, and “post-growth societies” (Elsen 2014). They relate to the assumption that a reduced need for short-term financing of products and services allows for more environmentally sensitive investments, better protection of natural resources and livelihoods (cp. ICA 2013, 14), and more resource-sensitive production, distribution, and consumption. A large number of implementations and case studies provide evidence, for example, of green investment options from the co-operative financial sector, the financing of environmental projects, numerous green co-operative businesses worldwide, and the creation of regional value chains.

One line of argument linking the *social and environmental dimensions* of co-operative sustainability draws on the assumption that as participatory organizations — with less pressure for short-term financing — co-operatives tend to take decisions that are much more socially and environmentally inclusive (cp. ICA 2013, 16). Another assumes that multi-stakeholder co-operatives are particularly good at increasing the capacity of their businesses to, for example,

10. See [http://www.corporateknights.com/wp-content/reports/2014\\_Sustainable\\_Co-ops.pdf](http://www.corporateknights.com/wp-content/reports/2014_Sustainable_Co-ops.pdf). Accessed 11 November 2014.

11. Missing out on the environmental dimension, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon stated in his opening remarks launching the United Nations 2012 International Year of Co-operatives that “co-operatives are a reminder to the international community that it is possible to pursue both economic viability and social responsibility.”

12. See [http://www.corporateknights.com/wp-content/reports/2014\\_Sustainable\\_Co-ops.pdf](http://www.corporateknights.com/wp-content/reports/2014_Sustainable_Co-ops.pdf). Accessed 11 November 2014.

reduce resource consumption, common ecological property, and emissions (including rebound effects) (ICA 2013, 16; Schröder and Walk 2013). Some efforts to include these improvements into business reports are already underway.<sup>13</sup>

### **Multi-Level Sustainability**

A third goal for co-operative sustainability would be to achieve multi-level integration within one or several dimensions, i.e., within a co-operative sector, a network of co-operatives, or a network of various stakeholders. The picture gets even more diverse when looking at the global movement. Discussions on achieving sustainability at different levels should be led by the co-operative movement's apex organizations. This becomes even more urgent when looking at the ICA's statement in the *Blueprint for a Co-operative Decade* that despite the assumed close links between co-operatives and sustainability, "at present, sustainability is [not] ... a term that is universally associated with co-operatives" (ICA 2013: 18).

The next section illustrates some assumptions and challenges to integrating several dimensions and levels of sustainability into co-ops by taking a look at recent developments in the German co-operative sector; the context is co-operative approaches to climate protection. The comments are far from comprehensive; that would be a matter beyond the scope of this paper. There are also other reasons, which will arise as we proceed.

## CURRENT TRENDS TOWARDS SUSTAINABILITY IN GERMAN CO-OPERATIVES

Climate protection can be seen as a three-dimensional challenge on different levels. While the focus has been on the national and global levels for a considerable time, local levels have also come to attention. Climate change is a major challenge affecting most global, national, and local economies, societies, and natural resources in various ways. But climate-related research on lifestyles and consumption, so far, has drawn primarily upon findings from environmental sociology and environmental psychology (Spaargaren and Mol 2008), which focus on individuals and neglect ecologically ambivalent "patchwork" lifestyles

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13. "The *World Co-operative Monitor*, ... is looking to expand its data collection into others areas, including social and environmental reporting." See [http://www.corporateknights.com/wp-content/reports/2014\\_Sustainable\\_Co-ops.pdf](http://www.corporateknights.com/wp-content/reports/2014_Sustainable_Co-ops.pdf). Accessed 11 November 2014.

(Reusswig 1994). But Adger (2001, 1) assumes that collective action for local climate protection is one of the essential, as-yet-unexploited capacities of human societies.

And that's where co-operatives come into play. On the local level, they address everyday needs and have the potential to promote new, more sustainable behavioural and social patterns of action for individuals, civil society, policy makers, and economic actors. They can do so by providing information, communication, and education on various social, cultural, ecological, and economic issues, by allowing for the greatest possible involvement of their members in decision making, and by bringing together resources both material and otherwise to assist in implementing sustainable projects. On the national and global levels, the large number of co-op members and their organizations can contribute considerably to climate protection by collectively reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and resource consumption, by developing and promoting innovative approaches to sustainable lifestyles, and by acting as role models.

In Germany, as in other countries, the first co-operative-like structures evolved within the agrarian sector and became especially popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But unlike England and France, where early socialists such as Richard Owen and Charles Fourier were instrumental in the development of the co-operative sector, the early twentieth century co-operative movement in Germany grew increasingly apart from the workers' movement — except for the housing and consumption co-op sectors (Vogt 2011). The most important spokespeople in Germany were neither peasants nor workers, but members of the educated classes: Friedrich Wilhelm Raiffeisen, who was active in the poverty-stricken Eifel region as a young mayor and founded rural credit unions, acting according to a Christian-conservative notion of caring; and Franz Hermann Schulze-Delitzsch, who was a left-liberal politician and co-founder of the “Deutsche Fortschrittspartei” (German Progress Party; Hardtwig 2009).

The image of co-operatives in Germany is somewhat blurred, due to restrictive co-operative laws implemented during fascist and GDR (German Democratic Republic) times, a general opposition to co-operatives as a leftist project, and a major scandal in the co-op sector in the 1980s. In addition, research on co-operatives is limited to legal and economic studies. For a short time, during the 1970s and 1980s, producer co-operatives became popular in the context of the alternative environmental movement (Atmaca 2014). Nonetheless, there is a considerable number, especially of housing and producer co-operatives, in both East and West Germany that date back well into the nineteenth century. After World War II, between 1950



and 1970, the number of registered co-operatives in Germany declined by almost a third (from more than 26,000 down to about 18,500), and in the three subsequent decades by another 50 percent (with only 9,500 registered co-operatives by the end of 1999, and a mere 7,500 since 2006; Stappel 2009). This can be explained in part by the concentration process in the financial co-op sector, but in addition, many co-operatives from all sectors have been converted into non-co-operative forms of organization.

### **Three Current Trends**

German co-operatives are currently both increasing and decreasing. On the one hand, there have been constant mergers and consolidations, especially in the credit sector (DZ Bank Research 2012; Table 1). On the other hand, there are a growing number of newly founded co-operatives. There are three reasons for this. *First*, in times of economic and social transformation, the idea of the co-operative model is gaining in significance worldwide due to the values ascribed to it. The consequences of a decade of privatizations and a growing mistrust of the capitalist economy led to widespread discussions about access to resources, quality of life, as well as the solidarity economy, eco-social transformation, the role of politics and civil society. The recent co-operative boom in Germany, especially in the energy and housing sectors, may be interpreted as a first reaction to this. Even more significant is the fact that some of them intend to make an explicit collective contribution to sustainability.

A *second* impulse that boosted the growth of co-operatives at approximately the same time was triggered by the energy transition. Recent years have seen the founding of more than five hundred energy co-operatives with some eighty thousand members, who have so far invested around €800 million in renewable energy (Keßler 2013 and Klemisch 2014, quoted in Walk and Schröder 2013). Along with associations and private partnerships, it was primarily the co-operatives that demonstrated the possibility of a different business model in this sector, by taking over electricity grids, for example, and creating systems of community self-sufficiency and bio-energy villages.

And *third*, the 2012 United Nations International Year of Co-operatives and the current decade of co-operatives (2011–2020) have significantly added to the publicity for and self-confidence of co-ops. The boom is reflected in both an increasing number of scientific articles and media reports as well as in the above-mentioned growth in various sectors.

Table 1: Total numbers of co-operative businesses in Germany, 1980–2011

Number of Businesses	1980	1990	2000	2010	2011
Co-operative banks	4,267	3,055	1,813	1,156	1,139
a. Credit co-operatives	4,246	3,037	1,794	1,138	1,121
b. Co-operative central banks	10	4	4	2	2
c. Special affiliated co-operatives	11	14	15	16	16
Rural co-operatives	5,228	3,725	3,815	2,480	2,413
a. Primary co-operatives <sup>*/**</sup>	5,168	3,672	3,780	2,474	2,407
b. Head offices <sup>***</sup>	60	53	35	6	6
Industrial co-operatives <sup>*</sup>	875	787	1,422	2,018	2,338
a. Primary co-operatives	856	772	1,410	2,009	2,329
b. Head offices	19	15	12	9	9
Consumers' co-operatives	94	30	53	33	31
a. Primary co-operatives	55	28	51	32	30
b. Head offices	39	2	2	1	1
Housing co-operatives	1,217	1,172	1,991	1,931	1,921
a. Primary co-operatives	1,217	1,172	1,991	1,931	1,921
b. Head offices	-	-	-	-	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>11,681</b>	<b>8,769</b>	<b>9,094</b>	<b>7,618</b>	<b>7,842</b>
<b>Members in Thousands</b>					
a. Co-operative banks	9,105	11,421	15,039	16,689	17,002
b. Rural co-operatives <sup>*/**</sup>	1,555	1,205	922	563	550
c. Industrial co-operatives <sup>*</sup>	337	257	255	315	407
d. Consumers' co-operatives	665	600	825	355	350
e. Housing co-operatives	1,613	1,724	3,033	2,822	2,846
<b>Total</b>	<b>13,275</b>	<b>15,207</b>	<b>20,074</b>	<b>20,744</b>	<b>21,155</b>

\* Water, electricity, and refrigerated glass-house co-operatives listed as rural co-operatives until 2008 have been listed as industrial co-operatives since 2009. The bioenergy, forestry, and timber co-operatives that were in part listed as industrial co-operatives until 2008 have been listed as rural co-operatives since 2009.

\*\* Excluding credit co-operatives with transactions in commodities; including agricultural co-operatives.

\*\*\* Since 2006, only main co-operatives.

Source: Slightly modified representation of DZ Bank Research, "Die deutschen Genossenschaften 2012. Entwicklungen–Meinungen–Zahlen," (Wiesbaden: Deutscher Genossenschafts-Verlag eG, 2012), 40.

## Economic Sustainability and German Co-operatives

Despite declining absolute figures, registered co-operatives in Germany still have more members than any other form of organization (some 20.5 million out of 80 million inhabitants). Almost every farmer is a member of at least one co-operative; more than 90 percent of all bakers and butchers, an average of 60 percent of all craftsmen, and an average of 75 percent of all retailers are still organized in co-operatives. While the co-op financial

sector has the largest number of members, housing co-operatives come in second place, with almost 3 million members and 2.2 million units to take care of — a good 10 percent of the national housing market. Although these figures demonstrate quite clearly the economic sustainability of the co-operative sector in Germany, the number of new co-operatives remains small, with just sixty newly registered co-ops in 2003 (seventy-four in 2006), compared to more than five hundred thousand new businesses registered in total (Atmaca 2007). And even the small co-operative boom doesn't show in numbers as other co-operatives are merging or being liquidated at the same time.

Beyond the business reports of specific co-operatives and the data provided in Table 1, above, it is not yet possible to provide comprehensive information on economic sustainability as data is missing regarding sector, size, and forms of co-operatives; even the number of new and liquidated co-operatives per sector, province, and size is lacking (DZ Bank 2012, 5). Nonetheless, in the aftermath of the 2007–08 economic crisis, the co-operative presence in the media has grown as they are increasingly being seen as a viable counter-strategy to the privatization of municipal enterprises. But surprisingly, when it comes to counselling on start-ups, very few institutions are providing information on co-op development. Even German trade unions offer little information on and support for co-operative forms of organization (Vogt 2011).

### **Social Sustainability and German Co-operatives**

By 2013, the range of German co-operative activities had spread to an extent that made it difficult to generalize even at the national level. And while expectations for social co-operatives were quite optimistic in the early 2000s (Alscher and Priller 2007), not much attention has been paid to them until recently — there aren't even specific laws for social co-operatives. One exception was the national programme on social cities — the Bund-Länder-Programm “Soziale Stadt,” 1999 to 2012 — which actively supported the founding of so-called neighbourhood, i.e., multi-stakeholder, co-operatives. As they offered mainly low-paid jobs and services such as janitors, gardeners, and cleaners, the large majority went bankrupt after a couple of years. Beginning in 2000, there were twenty initiatives for such co-operatives, but in 2013 only five still existed.

While there is some quantitative and qualitative data on the economic aspects of co-operatives, the social sciences have so far largely neglected this organizational model. There are

hardly any qualitative studies concerning the social aspects of co-operatives or their activities, specifically the solidarity-oriented and participative structures (Schröder 2014), and with the exception of Zimmer (2009) and Münkner and Ringle (2010) their relations to local communities have not been researched at all. In addition, no data is available regarding social structures within co-operatives or on how many co-ops are legally non-profits (DZ Bank 2012, 5). Nonetheless, most recent public discussions describe co-operatives as problem solvers for a large variety of societal challenges, which has overloaded this form of organization with idealistic ideas and frequently suggested it as a substitute for public agencies. Stakeholders sympathetic to the co-operative movement, as well as some of the literature, point out that one of the major assets of co-operatives is that they are based on the notion of solidarity (Vogt 2011). But an even larger number of stakeholders — mainly economists — argue repeatedly that co-operatives are mainly obliged to the interests of their members — to economic self-help — and not to a common welfare, however defined.

### **Environmental Sustainability and German Co-operatives**

During the 1990s, many LA21 activities<sup>14</sup> were implemented in German municipalities; they dealt primarily with issues of greening communities, sustainable mobility, housing, and fair trade. Recently, climate protection activities have soared as the majority of municipalities and towns have committed themselves to this issue. Housing and energy co-operatives are the most active regarding aspects of both environment and climate protection. As mentioned above, with 3 million members (out of just over 20 million co-op members altogether) and approximately 10 percent of the total housing stock in Germany, the co-operative housing sector is significant. According to Atmaca (2014), this can be explained by the fact that housing co-operatives implement more measures to increase energy efficiency than any other type of public housing organization. It is in the interest of the members to invest money in the renovation of their houses as they are both owners and users of the flats (cp. Sanchez and Roelants 2011, 107; Chevallier 2011, 37).

Between 2010 and 2012, 23 percent of all new co-ops were founded in the energy sector, operating local or regional solar plants, wind farms, and bioenergy plants (Pollich 2009).<sup>15</sup>

14. Local Agenda 21 (LA21) was promoted by the United Nations to deliver sustainable development at the local government level.

15. Volz (2010) indicates that there were one or two new formations of energy co-operatives per month in 2010, and around seventy new formations for the years 2000–2008 in Germany.

Although concern for the environment certainly plays a role in some rural areas — most prominently in the so-called bio-energy villages, which aim at 100 percent local renewable energy — some experts assume that legal and political aspects, particularly feed-in tariffs, play a more important role in the decision to found an energy co-operative (Flieger 2011).

When looking at the environment-related objectives of the German co-operative movement, a distinction should be made between “traditional” (before 2006) and “new” (after 2006), as only since 2006 does co-operative law allow for cultural and environmental objectives (Atmaca 2014). Today, one can find a small but growing number of new (and rather small) co-operatives in the energy/water, housing/construction, consumption, and mobility sectors that refer explicitly to sustainability and even more specifically to climate protection (Schröder and Walk 2013).

### **Connecting the Dimensions**

While there is a considerable economic dimension to German co-operatives, and recently an environmental one, too, the dimension of social sustainability — beyond job creation — seems quite limited. There have been almost no systematic efforts to acknowledge the social or environmental dimensions, especially in the financial sector: The largest and oldest co-operative bank in Germany, for example, only began publicly advertising the fact that it was a co-operative in 2011, and announced in May 2013 that it had finally stopped participating in global food speculation.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the large number of members and the recent small boom, co-operatives as a form of organization are surprisingly unknown and the majority of the older co-operatives would rather not emphasize the fact that they are different from other businesses. Only recently, in the context of discussions about taking the energy and water sectors back under municipal control, did the idea of co-operatives come to the public mind, even in larger cities such as Hamburg and Berlin.

Interestingly, most new co-operatives aim to integrate all three dimensions. The problem is that most of them, especially in the housing, mobility, and consumer sectors, are quite small, with sometimes only twenty-plus members; their boards are usually not paid and they have limited resources. This leaves them struggling with their day-to-day existence, with little time left for networking and lobbying.

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16. See <http://www.zeit.de/wirtschaft/unternehmen/2013-05/DZ-Bank-keine-Nahrungsmittelspekulation>.

## Climate Protection and Lifestyles in Co-operatives

During our research,<sup>17</sup> it became evident that connecting climate protection topics and the social dimension is difficult for co-operatives as the potential benefits and challenges have yet to be discussed. For example, it is a significant challenge for co-operatives to come up with ideas on how to make climate-relevant daily routines — e.g., the individual buying and using of electrical devices — more sustainable. Another challenge is to include people with low or limited incomes. As difficult as this proves to be in research on sustainability in general, there are even fewer practical examples and research results when it comes to co-operatives and climate change.

The list below of technical, socio-cultural, and political approaches to climate protection by co-operatives is intended as a catalyst for discussion.

- *Technical approaches*: increasing resource efficiency (energy consumption, waste production, transport); using energy-efficient devices (refrigerators, heaters, printers, washing machines, etc.); sharing devices; recycling; implementing new technologies; product quality control; reducing noise production and unnecessary light emissions; energy-efficient retrofitting; reducing the use of pesticides; responsible accounting; climate or carbon footprints; sustainable production and logistics; use of renewable energies; glass plates for freezers, etc.
- *Socio-cultural approaches*: providing fresh, organic, regional products; communication; participation; (mutual) education; work groups; supporting members / explaining technologies via facilitators, games, swapping, bartering, sharing, etc.; mobility helpdesks; energy competitions, games, transparency regarding value chains etc.; sustainable management practices; innovations in accounting such as “social return on investment,” “social impact reporting,” social auditing, etc.
- *Political approaches*: transgressing co-op’s organizational boundaries; lobbying; networking; role-models; membership in local, regional, national, or global alliances (climate protection, fair trade, etc.); co-operation with other co-operatives or NGOs; membership in a local-to-global climate environmental alliance; public advocacy on sustainability; facilitation and support for inter-co-operative co-operation, etc.

Sources: Schröder and Walk 2014; Scharp and Bergner 2006; ICA 2013.

17. The research project, titled “Solidarische Stadt,” on co-operatives and their (potential) roles in climate protection, ran from 2010 to 2013 and was funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research.

### Participation in Co-operatives

Regarding the collective aspect of co-operatives inherent in the ICA's definition of sustainability, there are two ways to integrate sustainability and climate protection in co-ops. The first is the introduction of such topics and measures by the board, the other, by its members.

According to findings from our research project, the facilitation of member participation is one of the major preconditions for raising awareness of sustainability issues and implementing sustainable projects.<sup>18</sup> Relying on the assumption that member participation is inherent to the co-operative model does not help make the co-operative movement more sustainable. The degrees and forms of participation vary. Paradoxically, members of German co-operatives regard participation as a great co-operative advantage, but then fail to participate. In fact, often only a minority of members exercise their democratic rights (von Blanckenburg 2014; cp. Saxena 1995). This is true at least for Germany, where the numbers of participants in annual meetings are, on average, significantly lower than voter turnout at local and national elections, and much lower than participation in EU elections.

Lack of time is what seems to prevent members from participating in most cases (von Blanckenburg 2014). In consequence, the development of opinions and decision making in German co-operatives — two core elements of participation — are frequently concentrated in the board of directors. According to the research findings, issues such as climate protection and the implementation of climate protection measures have been introduced to co-operatives mainly through their boards (cf. von Blanckenburg 2014). Exceptions are co-operatives that are committed explicitly to climate protection (i.e., with climate protection embedded in their rules), where most members are already aware of the issue before joining. These co-ops involve their members in opinion making to an extent that goes beyond the mandatory general assembly of larger co-operatives, setting up working groups and offering workshops, for example. In many cases, the members organize these events themselves, providing the co-op with a large pool of expertise and consequently demanding that their ideas

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18. This may differ from the assumption in the *Blueprint for a Co-op Decade* that participation and sustainability are two equally important, but not necessarily codependent, aspects within the co-operative movement (ICA 2013).

and concepts be integrated into the organization's management. Regrettably, there are fewer than ten such co-operatives in Germany at the moment.

On the downside, members may feel stressed, misunderstood, or not taken seriously if the board does not offer them the resources to implement their ideas. As in other organizations, there are informal power structures in co-operatives. Since power is often concentrated in the board — especially in larger co-operatives — proximity to the board of directors is an important prerequisite for exerting influence. This is usually done by particularly committed members, groups of committed members, and frequently founding members. On the other hand, boards seek consultants within, but increasingly also outside, the co-operative — and hence outside the participative structures of the co-op. This is why the power of working groups is often regarded as ineffective (cf. von Blanckenburg 2014).

On the supra-organizational level, the German co-operative federations are not very supportive either, their range of education being limited to core economic topics such as human resources, management, and accounting. And only a handful of external counsellors provide information and support for specific sectors — housing and energy, for example — not to mention educational institutions such as schools, universities, or vocational schools.<sup>19</sup>

The German co-operative movement seems to be challenged in another way as well: other co-operatives are seen mainly as parallel organizations, especially within the same sector, and there are as yet few examples of co-operation between co-operatives; exceptions are the housing co-operatives in Duisburg. And again, the co-operative federation provides mainly structural, legal, and economic advice and makes few efforts to lobby publicly for the co-operative idea in general.

## CONCLUSIONS

While the German co-operative movement is in many respects different from those in other countries, its case provides good insight into the diversity and complexity of the current co-op landscape. Dealing with that diversity and complexity is one of the major challenges for the global co-op movement when it comes to implementing sustainability.

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19. The 2006 and 2013 amendments to the German Co-operative Act resulted in easier founding procedures for co-operatives with social, environmental, and cultural objectives. To what extent the amendments have contributed or will contribute to the support issue is disputed among experts and likely differs from sector to sector (cf. DZ Bank Research 2012).



There are opportunities for numerous approaches to sustainability through varieties of membership structure,<sup>20</sup> within different sectors, with different sets and combinations of measures (technical, political, socio-cultural), and with differing scopes (neighbourhood, municipality, region). In fact, specific measures have even proven to have different success levels in different municipalities and socio-cultural contexts.<sup>21</sup> It is thus difficult if not impossible to provide standardized recommendations for a co-operative transition towards sustainability.

Crucial for such a transition with a member-based organization is raising awareness of sustainability issues. This happens best via communication and participation among members, but also between members and boards; this may provide a basis for a broader acceptance of measures and also for individual engagement. In any case, it should be asked how and to what extent sustainability can be connected to the objectives of the co-operative and its members' interests.

While some sectors are more likely to be associated with implementing specific dimensions and forms of sustainability — for example, agriculture, housing, mobility, and energy — a transition to some form of sustainability can be achieved in any co-operative sector.

The participatory structures of co-operatives open up possibilities for sustainable activities that stand out from those of other business forms. Provided the members agree, co-operatives could, in fact, invest in sustainability, even if it lowered the company's profits.

And with a trend towards smaller co-operatives, one can imagine an even larger variety of locally adapted co-ops.<sup>22</sup> This may provide for an even more diversified set of ideas for transitions to sustainability.

A major challenge that has not been mentioned is the question how and to what extent increased sustainability is connected to the distribution of natural and financial resources. This touches upon questions of (climate) justice and fairness and the management and distribution of local (material and immaterial) resources. Nonetheless, involvement in collective structures such as co-operatives offers a practical opportunity to break down global problems into collective and local ones.

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20. Including numbers, ages, skills and expertise, self-conceptions, etc.

21. This includes the specifics of a certain co-operative sector and its regional or national status regarding legal frameworks, economic and political cultures, and potential partners in the private economy, civil society, and public administration.

22. Described as the “new localism” of sustainable development (cf. Bulkeley and Kern 2006; Collier and Löfstedt 1997).

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