

Community-based cooperation.

From local experiences to a short manifesto for local development

Giovanni Teneggi

In 2003, a research by Confcooperative Reggio Emilia into the social and economic presence of its members in the Italian Apennines focused on the organisations among them that could not easily be placed alongside the others as typical forms of mutuality. The name of the village featured in their articles of association or even in their name, and their goal was external, in that it targeted the needs of the entire community: 'Valle dei Cavalieri', active for 12 years already in Succiso, and the recently established 'Briganti del Cerreto' in Cerreto Alpi. Their presence helped words such as 'cooperative', 'community', 'locals', 'life', 'mountain' resurface together and with vigour.

The kind of mutuality that they were expressing – and which they still embody today in a more mature and eloquent manner – reversed the trend towards productive and technical specialisation by cooperatives at the service of a work or processing chain, and instead revived an older narrative, in which the cooperative was an integral part of the social and economic infrastructure in the life of the locals in a community. In the research that was carried out then, the description of those *anomalies* did not deal mainly with data and markets, as was the case for all other organisations, but with the stories and experience of their main characters. Devoting attention to these exceptions and

giving them space required understanding them as a collection of emotions, lives and destinies.

In those same communities, a small step back in time and space is all it takes to retrace a story in which cooperatives play a significant role and that is capable of bringing back to light a kind of mutuality that extended to the community and was not simply internal to the single organisations, but constituted a new phenomenon, even in comparison to the social mutuality which could be recognised in the then still young cooperatives described in Law no. 381/1991. We are talking about cooperative dairies, where milk is transformed into Parmigiano Reggiano. On that mountain, every village – or as they are called around here, every borgata – was identified by its own social dairy. They not only represented the place where milk from each family was delivered to so that its value could be transformed into cheese to be sold – where it was basically converted into its price –, but also as a meeting place for social interaction, for political and civic discussions and for further education and welfare. No definition or form of the welfare state were known then, but rural households could rely on the ‘dairy meetings’ to find help for the survival needs of their families in case of disease, death, abandonment or any other adversity in life. The social cooperative dairy was not only a production facility but also, and above all, a place where coexistence and the interconnectedness that stem from living in the same community manifested themselves. This experience was not unlike the rural cooperatives, consumer cooperatives and credit cooperatives of the Alpine valleys, which were intrinsically community-based, starting from the end of the nineteenth century throughout the developments that have

accompanied them to our days until, again, the life of these places showed that mutuality in communities is necessary and valuable and should be jealously protected.

The *words* chosen by the founders of Valle dei Cavalieri – some young members of the local *proloco* grass-roots association – when the organisation was established in 1991 in Succiso are emblematic of this return to a mutuality of *place*. The one surviving café and bar in the village had just closed its doors for the last time. However, what the young people feared was not so much its absence, but rather the fact that there would no longer be a place for social conversation. “We told ourselves – recalls Dario Torri, the President – if the bar closes down, where will we gather to welcome our friends and family when they come back?” In Cerreto Alpi, depopulation of the village and “the lack of children born here and who stay on to live here with their families”, along with the rebellion of the last few young people left against the inexorable truth of abandonment and migration to the valleys that “leaves empty houses and cold fireplaces behind”, led to the creation of the cooperative ‘I Briganti del Cerreto’. These words were spoken by Luca and Erika Farina, two of those young people who enacted this *subversion* by establishing the cooperative with the help of their fathers, mothers, uncles and aunts, of their family’s knowledge and – of course – their blessing. The children had to learn again the value of the woodland along with the hard work it requires, and the first fireplace that they lit up with the consensus of their community was the one in the *metato*, a small stone building used traditionally to dry chestnuts. When the Succiso bar reopened,

The cycle and development of a community cooperative



Source: Concooperative, AAVV, „La cooperativa di comunità: un circolo virtuoso per il territorio“, 2016

Cooperative 'I Briganti del Cerreto'



it was no longer a simple café and bar. It became a shop, and then a restaurant and a bakery, an agriturismo and environmental education centre, a farm and a service point for the local population. The rekindled *metato* in Cerreto Alpi does not simply dry the chestnuts of its woods so flour can be made from them, as was done in the past. It is the place where local children learn about their roots, and where visiting tourists staying in the restored water mill can listen to the stories told by the elderly people who still live there.

From these experiences, which are part of the broader story of community in the mountains and in Italian rural life, many others were born across Italy, even in metropolitan areas. They are all infrastructures featuring participation to maintain and revive vulnerable communities that were 'dying out', although their "embers" were still burning under the ashes. Many such 'embers', never extinguished and still providing a social harness in the villages and valleys, are easily recognized. Today, we call them community cooperatives, and we acknowledge this phenomenon and its moder-

nity in the face of growth dynamics that affect central areas such as cities.

After a long observation over 15 years, gathering knowledge, carrying out analysis and finding the code of these experiences, we can attempt to describe their modelling and thus move on from the collection of stories to the technical phase: dissemination, promotion and establishment. This action can now certainly refer to community mutuality and its forms as a tool for development in the social, political and economic context and in any context that could be identified as 'low-density' in terms of resources and accessibility. Indeed, we can by now find established reasons and successful practices in these experiences that allow for new reasons and practices in contexts that are not part of the most common growth trends that select and concentrate opportunities geographically, as well as in contexts with unsurmounted obstacles to social, political or physical access that produce abandonment in the mountains and social risk in the cities.

It is therefore clear that the significance of all this reaches much further than simply opportu-

nities for advertisement and continuing cooperation. It concerns, more generally, entrepreneurial development of the *white areas* on the map, those where the free market has failed, those which have been abandoned by profit undertakings and where the state has failed, in which public action has gradually withdrawn, losing an increasingly large part of history and local community to competitiveness, thus making it a place of risks and land-use issues.

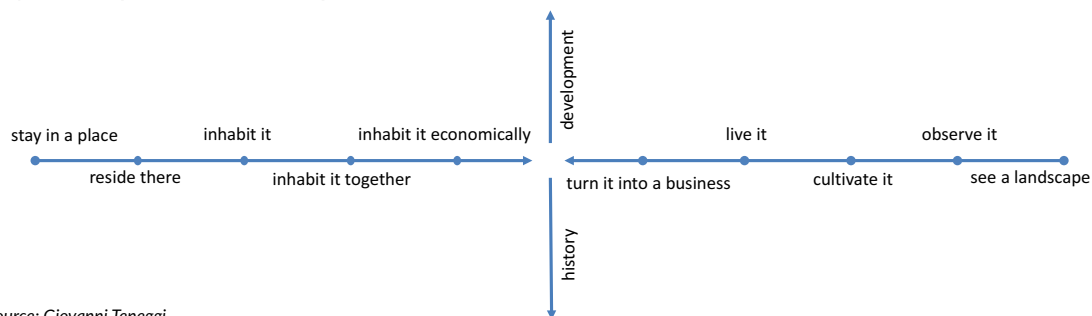
Having considered approximately one hundred cases of this kind, we can say that community cooperatives – i.e. cooperative enterprises constituted by the inhabitants of an area or region to organise economic activities and social solutions locally – succeed where others fail or give up.

Let us try to summarise the reasons for this. First of all, the companies that are part of community cooperatives embody the *epic* determination of their founders to resist. They are made up of visionaries, prophets who are part of the minorities that, in the face of all the adversities, do not want to leave, or who want to return. These are fearless initiatives that come with a certain risk, as well as human and historic determination – rather than a financial or technical purpose. It would be wrong to reduce this founding impulse to political and economic reasons, because it is actually typical of endeavours, always and in all contexts. The ability to dream and take on risks in relation to a social project and in critical conditions is expected and attractive, and it is often an ‘incubator’ for innovation and new forms of creativity. If we look at how

this ‘thrust’ is part of the visionary and technological innovation of *start-ups* in Italy and in the world, then it becomes clear that the anomaly of the recklessness that we tend to pinpoint and stigmatise in the areas that we are discussing is not related to the character of the idea itself, but to the context for which it is generated. This cultural discrimination tends to divide communities up in advance in terms of strong and weak ones, thus limiting the availability of interest and investment.

The members of these cooperatives, regardless of how they belong to the community (as natives, returning natives or aliens), find the starting point for their enterprise in local history, there where it was broken off or interrupted. Their strengths reside not only in innovation and change, essential though they may be, but first and foremost in listening and communicating. Their purpose is to establish a dialogue with a place that is again able to participate actively in a narrative. In our reference contexts, the entrepreneurial idea has social roots and requires cultural skills that bring the people and places who are involved to the forefront, and not just their activities and organisation. Precisely for this reason, the *leadership* which initiates and guides these processes, whilst representing minorities that are an ‘outpost’ for the local community, is always pedagogical in nature and authoritative. The institutional context that historically favours this development is relevant: a *pro loco*, family groups, third sector organisations or other cooperatives, resilient community agencies, such as parishes or sports associations, and local chapters of public bodies. When the context is insuffi-

Ways of entrepreneurial citizenship



Source: Giovanni Teneggi

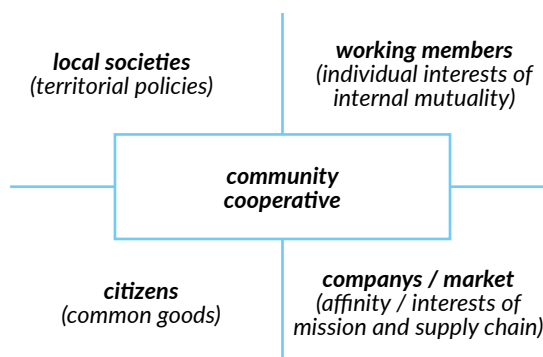
cient in terms of structures of this nature, it is cooperative planning itself that must re-establish it through temporary structures, support objectives and by adding to the existing social structure.

These two preliminary conditions let cooperative initiatives play an active role in the community and its development and portray the chance to bring latent opportunities for development, as they have privileged access *to local objects and houses*. When we have resourceful people and a story's broken thread to mend, these projects will naturally access tangible and intangible local assets, rediscovered and re-qualified to evoke identity, be useful to the community, and produce value-added economies that reach throughout the community. A forest, a local tradition, a historic courtyard, a road, craft-based knowledge: these are local assets, local heritage – both public and private – that become inaccessible when abandoned, and accessible, by contrast, when its owners propose an endeavour, an enterprise that is *recognisable* and *shows recognition*. A form of access to local resources *that takes into account* the local inhabitants who own them by right or tradition is also the prerequisite to ensure that the enterprise is feasible, authentic in terms of market demand and of its having common good as its goal. This trait cannot be taken for granted and is not obtained through persuasive practices of mediation, confrontation or expropriation. Community enterprises are convincing as they are active in terms of identity expression for local populations, reconciling the present with the history that originated it and generating solutions for life in the local community.

Sustainable community cooperation also proposes a revision of the paradigm of entrepreneurial profitability in the long-term perspective of cooperation and its non-speculative nature. Community cooperatives do not enrich anyone according to the purposes of profit economics, and they do not even maximise the value of the generated resources, in accordance with the purposes of economics of mutuality. In order to tackle the question of sustainability in their natural contexts, these initiatives have a key objective which is

centred around the common good of living in the community. Thus, we could say that community cooperation *remunerates* those who accept the challenge and take care of it *with life*. Its vision of the relations between the actors and the local resources is instinctively eco-system based, and knows that it has to balance the distributed values according to a shared life plan among the actors on the territory, both those who are direct members of the endeavour and those who simply live in the area that constitutes the social goal of the organisation.

The community budget is one of the most interesting practices modelled by these experiences. The final and higher accounting of the cooperative community activities has nothing to do with corporate profit, nor with the value of refunds to members, but rather with the added value determined by the cooperative activities for the locals and businesses in its community.



Source: Confcooperative, AAVV, „La cooperativa di comunità: un circolo virtuoso per il territorio“, 2016

The co-operators whom we are speaking of here are community natives (or returning natives) and digital adults. They do not see contradictions or conflicts in these two dimensions (*social in the community and social online*), as they are capable of reinterpreting and having them join forces with cutting-edge productive, relational and geographic innovation, also in relation to the development of densely-populated territories. In their offer to the market, frequently also in the internal organisational mode, the *social web* extends the

boundaries of their natural area of reference and changes the physical characteristics of the land under discussion. They are no longer central or peripheral, but exactly at the heart of a world that has been rebuilt thanks to the new social and market relations that they have established. It is not uncommon for the borders of a single resourceful village with a community cooperative to be gradually offset by new communication routes opened in the market which bring an end to their inaccessibility. This technological and relational element always characterizes these experiences for the tension and capacity it has towards external and innovative added-value economies. The rediscovered and 'relit' *assets* become new production chains that disrupt the inertia that a purpose merely based on identity or the wish to be resilient would have. This community renaissance, however, in no case allows for the creation of a parallel relational world of virtual value, in which stories and assets are preyed upon and consumed. Each relation, online or in the community, has the immediate opportunity for physical and local expression, and in a certain sense it cannot endure if it is not brought to where the founding value of the initiative is expected. There is no *exit* from a community *start-up* for any of its beneficiaries, unless it is aimed at establishing something and bringing life to the place, to the community.

A final feature in this short manifesto of the community cooperative enterprise: it is embodied in the words alliance, coproduction and multi-functionality. These experiences are generated and developed in contexts of alliance among actors of different formal and informal, public and private nature. They do not entail production unless it is designed and developed in the chain with other actors on the territory. They do not entail any useful activities, in any sector, unless they are implicitly multi-functional and capable of generating solutions for local populations. It is clear, therefore, that the sustainability of the enterprise in critical contexts such as these is measured according to this rule in terms of experience: sustainability requires the qualification of the founding and productive processes in terms of adhesion to the

purpose of each social action and each agreement required or derived thereof.

The relevance of this model has become widely established, alongside the unique and extraordinary character of its individual experiences or applications. We are certainly facing a systemic evolution of the concept of mutuality, and it is no coincidence that this reveals a time-frame and a socio-economic context that, again, seek platforms for cooperation among people, methods of co-production, participatory institutions, and devices for the cohesion and management of growing social conflict. These outcomes are constantly present in community cooperation, which now also involves cooperatives that are already operating in initiatives to extend their action or in *spinoffs*, confirming its role as a reliable, more effective and less burdensome producer of confidence and opportunities for community governance.