

Competence Development in Cooperatives¹

Martin Mulder* and Dorine Orbons

Wageningen University
Social Sciences Group – bode 68
Chair Group of Education and Competence Studies
PO Box 8130
NL-6700 EW Wageningen
Hollandseweg 1
6706 KN Wageningen
Netherlands
Phone: + 31 317 48 41 81; Fax: + 31 317 48 45 73
Mobile: + 31 6 20 677 340
Email: martin.mulder@wur.nl
Internet: www.ecs.wur.nl
Internet: www.mmulder.nl

* Corresponding author

¹ The research reported in this contribution is an exploration to further study learning in cooperatives, and is financially supported by the Chair Group of Education and Competence Studies of Wageningen University.

Abstract

This study explores the question whether cooperatives are special learning environments for stakeholders within cooperatives.

A purposeful sample of five large agricultural cooperatives was drawn from the population of cooperatives in the Netherlands, based on size, reputation, variety and accessibility. The biggest cooperation had a turnover of almost 10 billion Euros and more than 14,000 members.

The following data collection methods were used: qualitative semi-structured in-depth interviews with representatives of the cooperatives, elected board members, and representatives of an external training institute and of the National Cooperative Council (NCR). A literature and desk research complemented the exploration. Hermeneutic interpretation of the data was performed.

The results of the study were that cooperatives strongly support the competence development of elected board members. Competence development support of employees is not different from non-cooperative organizations. Competence development of producers-members however is marginal, and sometimes even not appreciated by the producers-members.

Keywords: cooperative, competence development, board members, management, learning, HRD

Short bibliographical notes

Martin Mulder is Professor and Head of the Chair Group of Education and Competence Studies at Wageningen University, the Netherlands (www.ecs.wur.nl). He is editor of The Journal of Agricultural Education and Extension and published and presented his work widely in Europe, the Americas, Africa and Asia. He is currently honorary member of the Vocational Education and Training Network of the European Educational Research Association and Immediate Past-Chair of the Special Interest Group Workplace Learning of the American Educational Research Association (www.mmulder.nl).

Dorine Orbons is a research assistant at Wageningen University. After a career in education she studied Educational Science at the University of Utrecht. She completed her Master thesis on reflection on learning with the qualification cum laude.

Introduction

The year 2012 has been the international year of the cooperatives. Cooperatives are enjoying a renaissance. Bijman, Iliopoulos, Poppe, et al (2012) recently completed a study for the European Commission on the support of farmer's cooperatives, in which the level of development of cooperatives and legal and regulatory enablers and constraints in the European Union is described. The study also paid attention to support measures and initiatives for the development of agricultural cooperatives. One of these measures is human capital development, which is studied by Gijssels (2012) in Belgium and Canada. Cooperatives are seen as an interesting alternative for purely competitive business models with their many well-known negative side effects. Bijman, Iliopoulos, Poppe, et al (op cit) state that one of the drivers of research into cooperatives is related to the power differences between key stakeholders in the food sector. The voluntary development of agricultural producer organizations is therefore stimulated and supported. The idea is that this will help their sustained position in the global food production market and to secure a market-related income, as in many regions income levels of farmers are low or even under the minimum.

The first cooperatives were indeed created to improve the political and social situation of workers. There are different types of cooperative: producer and consumer cooperatives. Producer cooperatives are associations of independent producers, such as in the dairy, sugar and wine sector, who own their own business. These cooperatives are regarded as being a good socio-economic model of work organization (Majee and Hoyt, 2011). Consumer cooperatives are for instance mutual insurance companies, housing associations or cooperative banks, some of which are international and have a triple-A status. In essence, both types of cooperatives are about risk division, and therefore serve the collective interests of the members. Apart from that there are many differences. The most striking difference may be the nature of the membership. Clients of a cooperative bank may not even notice the cooperative nature of the bank, whereas members of a producer cooperative have a business relationship with the cooperative, and have a strong commercial interest in it.

This paper is about producer cooperatives, since competence development is more pertinent to this type of cooperative than to consumer cooperatives. Consumer cooperatives do not offer competence development arrangements such as training and development to their clients with the intention to make the cooperative a better organisation. This, however, may be expected

from producer cooperatives, and the purpose of this paper is to explore whether this indeed happens, and if so, how, and in which way it differs from learning in non-cooperative organisations. It follows earlier research on workplace learning or entrepreneurs in the greenhouse sector (Mulder, et al, 2007). The background idea of the study is to determine whether theories of corporate human resource development also hold for cooperative organizations. To specify this somewhat further, the research is aimed at describing and interpreting learning which goes on in producer cooperatives, and to see to what extent this differs from human resource development practices in non-cooperative organizations.

Conceptual framework

Although there are various differences between types of cooperatives in practice, the central principle of a (production) cooperative as a business type is quite clear: the members are the owners of the cooperative, and they work together to obtain a better economic position. Decisions are taken by democratically elected representatives, and members share their profits, not with external shareholders, but with each other.

Cooperatives exist all over the world in many sectors, as said, for instance in the financial, housing, education, and especially in the agro-food sector. Examples of this are the wine and olive oil cooperatives in Southern Europe, coffee and alpaca cooperatives in Latin-America or rice and silk cooperatives in Asia. In the Netherlands, there are cooperatives in various chains such as for flowers, vegetables, dairy, potatoes, beets, and others. Within the cooperatives, products are being produced, processed and/or traded.

Lately, the number of cooperatives is increasing (Bojorge, 2012) and they have a major economic and social significance (NCR, 2012). Cooperatives seem to have an advantage in times of crisis. According to Lamberink, Helmer and Brouwer (2012) cooperatives have so far withstood the crisis better than regular companies, because they have greater solvency, focus on the improvement of their conditions, and do not have conflicts of interest between shareholders and customers. Members may have temporary income decrease, but also a high payment security.

Although the basic principles of cooperatives have remained unchanged over the years, various innovations can be observed. Cooperatives started as local companies, but now they

often operate internationally. This means that members do not live and work in the local community anymore, but also that the benefits of the economic activities do not always directly benefit the local community. Internationalization of the cooperatives also means that they increasingly need managers who are operating at international level. Therefore, they need professional executives, who, next to the elected members of the executive boards, act as appointed corporate executive officers. These board members have a major impact on the vision and the direction in which a cooperative develops.

Modern cooperatives (or 'New Generation Cooperatives' as referred to by Harris et al, 1996; see also Stofferahn, 2009) use shares that may be traded between members. The general trend is that cooperatives shift from mainly producing raw materials to providing added value. This especially applies to agro-food cooperatives.

Learning in a cooperative

Nowadays, agro-food cooperatives are often knowledge-intensive and high-tech organizations which provide an important part of the gross national product. The agro-food cooperative sector, in which on-going innovations are needed in order to grow, depends not only on the development of the industry as a whole, but also on the competence development of the individual member-entrepreneur. This was shown for instance by the research of Lans in the field of competence development of entrepreneurs in greenhouse horticulture (Lans et al, 2004). Therefore, the learning and education of a member of a cooperative is becoming increasingly important for the success of the cooperative.

Surprisingly, learning in cooperatives is not a clear theme within cooperatives themselves. On the websites of the cooperatives, their magazines, annual reports or other written reports, learning for and of members is not a special issue, focus, topic or category. What happens in the field of learning has to be sought between the lines, in various sections, and in different places. Words like learning, training, and education, give only a few or no hits at all on most websites of cooperatives (although there are exceptions for training provisions for employees of the cooperatives). Even in a study to measure the value of a cooperative bank, education is no indicator (Klinkenberg and Stuivenwold, 2008). However, although learning is not mentioned, that does not mean that learning does not take place in cooperatives. Workplace learning is present in practically all organizations (Malloch, Cairns, Evans and O'Connor, 2010) especially of courses in learning organisations (Tjepkema, Stewart, Sambrook, Mulder,

Ter Horst and Scheerens, 2002). It obviously does. But does it differ from non-cooperative organisations?

We think there are several kinds of differences between a cooperative and a private company, such as in legal and financial matters. The most important differences that may affect learning of members are the following.

First of all, the relationship between members and management in a cooperative is different than in a private company. The members are owners of the cooperative, because they provide the cooperative with capital. Also, they have democratic control over the cooperative and its strategy. Furthermore, members have an obligation to the cooperative, because of their transaction commitment, which gives them economic advantage. For learning, this complex, multiple relationship could mean that cooperative members have different motives than co-workers who are operating in traditional firms, where e.g. attending a course may mean a better chance for promotion or retaining employment. Motivation in general is an important condition for learning (Lauwere et al., 2006); personal needs, the value of the learning content and the effectiveness of a particular learning strategy can all affect the motivation to learn (Fox, 1999). In particular, the personal needs of members of a cooperative may differ from other entrepreneurs. Due to the fact that they have influence on cooperative policy and are depending on each other, the loyalty to the cooperative and its members could be large (Jussila and Tuominen, 2010), and this could result in a strong motivation for learning. It should be mentioned, however, that the mutual dependency of members may vary by cooperative. When entrepreneurs produce different products, they consequently can be a member of different cooperatives. Since the importance of the products for the business may differ, the commitment to the cooperative can also vary. The commitment to a cooperative of a producer who deals with various cooperatives can be lower than that of mono-producers who entirely depend on one product for their business revenues.

Secondly, besides the commercial relationships mentioned above, there is also a social relationship. Many cooperatives are created to reduce inequalities, also with regard to personal development. One of the reasons to join a cooperative could be that a member wants to use the knowledge of the cooperative and its members. This would be a major stimulus to learn. Whether this ultimately happens is also depending on themselves to a large extent. Illeris (2003) for instance stated, that adults want to decide for themselves if, what, and how they are going to learn. Because adult learning is based on needs, there should be room for

differences, but also a certain degree of structure (Illeris, 2003). It seems that cooperatives provide both structure and freedom to engage in learning.

Thirdly, it is possible that members of a cooperative have more work-related networks than employees in a private enterprise, because in some cases they can be members of several cooperatives or associations. They also have multiple relationships with other actors in their supply-chain, such as suppliers and regulating bodies (Lans, Wesselink, Biemans and Mulder, 2004). When learning depends on the context and the number of relationships as suggested by Armson and Whiteley (2010), the chances of learning of these members may increase. As known, learning also partly depends on prior knowledge. When members have diverse contacts within a cooperative, and are a member of multiple cooperatives, they may have a broader background than entrepreneurs who are not in a cooperative. This could make them more effective in increasing their skills in learning situations. In a study on entrepreneurial learning, Mulder et al. (2007) showed that the entrepreneurs which were included in their study were inclined to learn by examples, an affordance which seems widely available in cooperatives. Moreover, learning becomes richer when different types of expertise of multiple stakeholders are brought together (Sol, Beers and Wals, in press), and this seems likely to happen in large cooperatives as well. Important here is, that getting information of many different types, does not necessarily lead to learning. Information exchange is important, but it is being processed differently, depending for instance on the education of the person receiving the information, the type of information, the context, or the relationship between communicating parties (Sligo et al., 2005; Werr et al., 2009). Information obtained through the cooperative could be more reliable to a member than information that is obtained through other channels, and therefore could have more influence.

Fourthly, power relationships in cooperatives are different from those private companies. The primary objective of the cooperative is not making profit, but the creation of added value for its members. That is why decisions, for instance in the field of workplace learning of members, are not in the hands of the economic power block in the chain, but in those of the democratically chosen boards of cooperatives. This could mean that personal circumstances can play a bigger role in decisions regarding workplace learning of members. It may also mean that autonomy of members within cooperatives is quite big. Research of Janz, Colquitt and Noe (1997) has shown that in a Community of Practice people-related autonomy is important for individual learning within a group, because it increases self-responsibility for learning.

Lastly, cooperation seems to be the big strength of a cooperative. By the very nature of cooperation, many affordances emerge for mutual learning. Socio-constructivist learning theory contends that learning especially takes place when people together solve problems in a given context. Learning from peers, which is essential in cooperatives, is often more effective than learning via teachers (Sligo et.al., 2005). However, practice shows that it is often difficult to get groups together for learning. The structure of a cooperative seems very suitable for this, because it is quite easy for members to get in contact with one another. Mobile communication technology and social media also facilitate contact between producers. Common problems and the necessity to collectively solve these problems with joint resources are important conditions to engage in learning.

When we look at the characteristics of cooperatives in this way, it seems as if the conditions for learning are favourable. The reason as to why cooperatives do not explicitly pay attention to learning may have different reasons.

Firstly, within a cooperative the autonomy and own responsibility of the members is prevalent, implying that the responsibility for competence development is put on the members themselves. Secondly, despite the fact that innovation is playing an ever more important role (NCR, 2012), the organisation of the cooperatives is still relying on the existing education and training infrastructure outside the cooperative. Thirdly, cooperatives are mainly created for economic reasons. The social motives for the creation of cooperatives probably primarily oriented towards socio-economic objectives and not in a social-educative direction.

Competence development in cooperatives unique?

When we conceive of a cooperative as an inviting and conducive environment for learning, and consider the specific position of members of a cooperative in their community as described above, the question is whether learning of members of the cooperative is different from that of members of other organisations. The assumption behind this notion is that members of cooperatives have an intrinsically different relationship with the stakeholders in the cooperative than co-workers in a non-cooperative organization have, the essence of which is ownership.

The answer on this question is difficult to find in the literature. Studies on workplace learning, competence development and human resource development, have largely been done with or

about employees of organisations. Competence development of employment creators, e.g. entrepreneurs has had less attention, although during the last decade this has been changing. Several studies have specified skills needed for agro-food entrepreneurs (Bergevoet and Van Woerkum, 2006; Mulder et al., 2007; Nuthall, 2006). However, studies which explicitly focus on learning of members of cooperatives seem to be missing; at least, we found no publications with special attention for the competence and the development thereof of members (entrepreneurs) in cooperatives.

In the agro-food entrepreneurial setting, it has been shown (Mulder et al., 2007) that the context of an entrepreneur is a rich, authentic and powerful learning environment, even though there is room for improvement. For this learning Verstegen and Lans (2006) defined competence clusters that are important for an agro-food entrepreneur: opportunity competences (recognising and developing market opportunities), relationship competences (interactions), conceptual competences (conceptual thinking), organising competences (organisation of resources), strategic competences (firm strategies), and commitment competences (the drive of the entrepreneur). These competence clusters seemed also useable for exploring competences of entrepreneurs in a cooperative. Verstegen and Lans (op cit) and Ondersteijn et al. (2003) furthermore pointed at personal/individual characteristics of an entrepreneur which are equally important for the success of a business. Entrepreneurs with certain personality characteristics may be easier inclined to join a cooperative (e.g. when they seek sales security). Accessing a cooperative may even reinforce or lessen certain personal characteristics. In this study we did not elaborate on that; we concentrated on competence of the members of cooperatives and the development of this competence.

Before starting to answer the question raised, three categories of stakeholders in cooperative organizations have to be distinguished: 1. Owner-members; 2. Board members; 3. Employees. To give a simplified example (the regulation of cooperative organizations varies considerably and is in certain cases quite complex), in a cooperative owner-members are farmers who deliver their produce to the processing company. These farmers collectively own the company, which is directed by an executive board. The farmers are regionally and nationally organized, and elected boards take care of the defence of the interests of the members and the cooperative at those levels. There are appointed and elected board members of the cooperative. The appointed board members mostly come from outside the cooperative, the elected board members by definition from inside the cooperative. The dairy factory (of

factories) have employees. The three stakeholder groups obviously play significantly different roles.

The owners of agro-food businesses have their own independent companies with various numbers of employees. These owners are therefore not only craftsmen, but also managers and entrepreneurs (Verstegen and Lans, 2006). As craftsmen, members have to let run the primary processes as smoothly as possible. As managers they have to be able to run the business from an administrative perspective to realise optimal efficiency and returns. Together with that they have to anticipate on and respond to societal developments. This seems to hold for members of a cooperative at large, although it is possible that certain tasks weigh differently for different members.

When members are being elected for a board position, they can become board members almost overnight. Board membership at the national level in many cases entails a full-time job. The daily supervision of the company is handed over to another person, and in many cases the board member is financially compensated for that. These board members have a totally different role than their primary one, which is business management. Their new role is aimed at cooperative governance. Board members thus represent their fellow members and are expected to defend the interests of both the cooperative and the individual members. In large cooperatives with many different and conflicting interests, it may be quite difficult to determine what members actually want, which means that balancing cooperative and individual interests is tricky. Regarding the different competence requirements of regular members and board members of the cooperative, the latter may not only need managerial capabilities, but also on social skills and pedagogical competence (Österberg et al., 2007).

Next to the members and an executive board, a cooperative also consists of varying numbers of employees. These co-workers are in most cases employed within the processing companies of the cooperative, but also in the central administration and support departments, such as in finance, logistics, and human resources. Next to that, a cooperative can have its own development department of maintaining relationships with other organisations who create innovation products and processes. It does not seem to be very probable that competence development of co-workers of cooperatives is strongly influenced by the fact that they do not work in a private company but in a cooperative, since the processing companies within cooperatives are comparable with processing companies in the competitive sector.

Research question

Starting with the unique situation of cooperatives, the question seems to be justified whether competence development of entrepreneurs who are members of cooperatives differs from that of independent agro-food entrepreneurs. Goals and objectives regarding economic and social development of members of cooperatives may have an added value for the competence development of the entrepreneur. Especially when members are being elected to a position in the board, competence development seems to take a radical turn. Therefore, the question of this study was: *to what extent are cooperatives distinct organizations with respect to the support of competence development of their members?*

Research methods

This explorative research studied five cooperatives in the Netherlands that belong to the seven agricultural cooperatives with the largest turnover in the country. They were selected by purposeful sampling on the basis of size, reputation, variety and accessibility. These cooperatives acted in the sectors of dairy, fruit and vegetables, floriculture, and agriculture. In 2011, the biggest cooperation had a turnover of almost 10 billion Euros and more than 14,000 members, the smallest cooperative had a turnover of more than 500 million euros and almost 3,000 members (NCR, 2012).

Qualitative semi-structured in-depth interviews were held with representatives of these cooperatives. The main thread during the interviews was the difference between competencies needed within and outside a cooperative. A questionnaire was used, which was divided into sections about members, directors and employees. In the section of the questionnaire about members, questions were asked about the vision on learning, the task of the cooperative regarding competence development for craftsmanship, management and entrepreneurship, the channels of information provision, the preference of the members regarding training and development, the emergence of working groups, and the specific reasons for stimulating learning. In the part about cooperative governance, questions were asked about the specific competencies for elected board members and external, appointed, board members, the

external and internal training opportunities, the internal culture of the cooperative and the future expectations for elected board members. Questions were included as well on the different training possibilities for employees within and outside the cooperative. In two cooperatives additional interviews were held with elected members of the board. In these interviews the emphasis was on development opportunities as member and elected board member, on the necessity and wishes regarding competence development and future plans. Furthermore, an interview was held with an external training institute which is specialised in the training of elected board members of cooperatives, which was focused on the difference between elected and external board members. Finally, an interview was held with a representative of the National Cooperative Council (NCR), which is the expert organization for the agricultural and horticultural cooperatives, serves as a platform for the directors of the associated cooperatives, and provides financial and insurance services for the cooperatives. The questions here were focused on the differences between the cooperatives and the possible effects this could have on training programs for directors.

A desk study on the cooperatives selected was also included. Hermeneutic interpretation of the data was performed to grasp the essence of the organisation of cooperation, the roles of the different actors in it, and the learning which was supported by the cooperative organisation.

Results

It was striking that none of the cooperatives which were studied had an elaborate vision on learning or on competence development. From the reactions of the representatives of the cooperatives it was noticed that they were not used to speak about training and competence development of members, but the importance of it was certainly recognised.

The results of this study are described on basis of the three groups of stakeholders which are distinguished in a cooperative until now, namely producers-members, members of the board, and employees.

Development opportunities for producers-members of cooperatives

Spreading and sharing knowledge and information is at the forefront of all cooperatives, when it comes to learning of its members. All cooperatives have different ways to disseminate information to meet the variety of content, wishes and learning styles of members.

Next to magazines (paper or online), e-mails and websites, all cooperatives have developed their own intranet. Certain cooperatives are further ahead with the development of this than others, but all see the added value of this interactive medium. Storing and retrieving of the own data of a member is the first step; next the sharing of best practices follows. By connecting yields of growing techniques or other technical data, this can result in relevant information for members. Real interactive working groups were not active anywhere yet, but realising knowledge networks via study groups, is the ultimate ambition of most of the cooperatives.

It is important to notice that the cooperatives become increasingly international and that as a consequence, their members not only work more at a distance of one another, but that a bigger diversity emerges between the members. Some cooperatives know different regulations for members who want to sell all or part of their products via the cooperative. Because of this, not all members have the same relationship with the cooperative. Intranet is a very effective channel for the information flows, which, as an effect, becomes more and more individual and complex.

Another frequently used way of disseminating knowledge and information are the meetings and workshops, which in most cases are being held at locations of producers. From the interviews with the elected board members appeared that this is very much appreciated.

Reasons for giving workshops can be: new measures of the government, spreading a renewed vision of the cooperative, societal trends, or needs of members.

Next to that, there is the individual coaching. This happens mostly at restricted scale and in reaction to individual request, for specific problems, for instance when the results and yields lag behind expectations. Individual help with buying and selling of quota also occurs.

Intensive forms of knowledge exchange are working groups. Only one cooperative had structural working groups organised around the production of a specific crop. In many cases, these groups fall apart as soon as the coaching of the cooperative falls out. Especially the time investment seems to be a problem for the members, as a result of which they disengage. The working group members seem to achieve good results, by which there may be learning effects. This however could be a case of the chicken or the egg; do members have better results because they participate in a working group, or do members who perform already well

especially participate in these groups? The impression that a member who only contributes, and who gets little in return, may be a reason the decrease or end participation in working groups.

Another direct form of learning is the provision of courses by or via the cooperative. There are standard courses for newcomers, but in most cases courses are being organised at a request, or as a result of a problem, both internally or externally.

No special competencies were found for members of a cooperative compared to other entrepreneurs. Important competencies which were mentioned to become a member are: communication and social competence, reflection, analysing, experimenting and innovation competence. Respondents also indicated that the emphasis on certain competence domains may differ: a member of a cooperative may have to be a bit more social, but may have to be less proficient in various tasks which the cooperative conducts, such as in marketing competence.

About the development of competence of members, all cooperatives had the same philosophy: competence development which can be done by other organisations does not belong to the tasks of the cooperative. One cooperative has offered courses to bind members more strongly to the cooperative, but the intended effect appeared not to happen. Also in the interviews with the board members, it was stated that they appreciate their freedom and own responsibility as member, and that they dislike interference of the cooperative regarding their own business administration.

Focusing on the roles of craftsman, manager, and entrepreneur, all interviewees stated that management competence development is not seen as the responsibility of the cooperative; this is left to the integrity of the members themselves. Looking after entrepreneurial competence was seen as task by two cooperatives. One of these is a marketing cooperative and is especially aimed at sales competence, for which it offers 'supplementary service', such as training. The other has much to do with (European) regulation which can have influence on business decisions; this cooperative sees it as its tasks to inform its members about that and if needed offer consultancy.

The most important task cooperatives conduct for themselves, is taking care of sufficient craftsmanship; that is, to support the members to perform qualitatively and quantitatively as good as possible. This is seen as the core business of the cooperatives. Practically all

information and knowledge, which are distributed via the way described above, were aimed at competence improvement for the role of craftsman.

Competence development of board members

Characteristic for cooperatives are the voting rights and the participation of members in the management of the cooperative. Four of the five cooperatives have developed a members' council; only one has a general membership meeting. There is a great legal freedom in how cooperatives can regulate participation, but members' councils elect the Supervisory Board and the Executive Board. Three cooperatives also have a Youth Council where young members can gain administrative experience. In addition to the elected members, most governing bodies also have external board members, although the elected members always have the majority of votes.

Although a governance career is only reserved for a few members, this is an important feature of a cooperative. All cooperatives have therefore a profile of directors. These profiles have very many different items. Some are very general, as being a member, to invest time, to have intellectual ability, but others include more specific skills. This means good communication and social skills, and in particular networking. Furthermore, this implies business skills, knowledge of the market, but also personal characteristics such as integrity, independence, and task-orientation. Furthermore, a vision and understanding is required.

All cooperatives offer board members competence development in these areas; the cooperative in most cases starts with the needs of the individual board member to function well. The training is thus more or less tailor-made. The structure of the training between the cooperatives is different, but the importance of it is recognised by all respondents. Training happens internally, as well as externally, by specialised training providers. The emphasis of internal training is mainly on knowledge of the own cooperative in the legal or financial area, but also about the culture within the cooperative, which is differently experienced by the board members than by the regular members. With regard to external training, this can either be provided by a specialized or a general training organisation.

The importance of a good training for elected board members is especially determined by their producer background, and their lack of experience with cooperative governance. In the interviews it became clear that board members have to be especially strong communicators, because they have to communicate with the membership, to which they are attached to a great

extent, and their external colleague-board members, who have a career as director, and are often specialists in for instance the financial domain. Specific competencies/skills which these board members need are therefore: 1. adaptation capacity to be able to work in both worlds, 2. persuasive power to reconcile different interests and create a platform for the vision they have to convey, 3. authority amongst the members, which can be gained by distinguishing individual and the collective interests well, and by good organising capabilities (the latter is also essential for combining the own business and the (part-time) position as board member), and 4. recognising and acknowledgement of the expertise of the appointed board members. Other, more general, competencies which were mentioned are: 1. being analytic and critical, 2. being able to handle complexity, diversity and new developments, and 3. being able to reflect, discuss, convince, meet, cooperate and network.

According to some respondents, cooperatives that invest more in training of members have fewer problems with finding board members. Young members currently often have higher education levels than in the past, and have more often done an internship or had a job outside the cooperative, which means that, in most cases, they have more general competencies than used to be the case with older generations in the agro-food sector. According to the respondents, this also has a positive influence on the motivation to learn; they are used to be trained and perceive this as enrichment and not as a duty (or even as a failure).

The chosen board members indicated that they were very studious and wanted to develop themselves. They see the investment they make for the cooperative also as an investment in their own development and indicate that the competences which they developed as board member also had an influence on the work in their own farm and in their private life. Competencies board members indicated they developed were: 1. analysing, 2. social skills, 3. networking, 4. reflecting, 5. communication and meeting skills, 6. presentation techniques, 7. insight in strategy, 8. legal competence, 9. financial competence and 10. general knowledge. They indicated they learned this by participating in courses, but mainly by doing and experiencing, and by talking with fellow course participants outside course sessions.

Elected board members stated that as a result of the development they experience in the field of cooperative administration, legal and financial issues as well as in the personal effectiveness, they establish a different relationship with the members. It was suggested that

the influence of the members' council has to stay important so that the contact with the members remains optimal.

The importance of competence development of the elected board members was widely recognised, but the respondents thought differently about the consequences of this for further career opportunities of these board members. Some thought that it would give them opportunities to get appointed in other boards, others felt that only few can make this cross-over. This could be true because their position in a non-cooperative board would be quite different; they would have no authority by being elected, they would not be widely enough trained and may not be able to verbally compete with professional directors from other disciplines.

Competence development of employees

All five cooperatives highly value the quality of their employees. They offer them both internal and external training opportunities. Two cooperatives have an online academy for employees and four cooperatives have developed an HR policy to develop the competencies of employees. One cooperative has received an award for Best Practice of their HR policy. One cooperative has no structured training plan for employees; it provides what a particular employee needs. From the interviews it appeared that much is done internally for the inception phase of new employees to get to know the work and culture of the cooperative. Despite no real differences could be found in the training of the staff with regular companies, some details emerged. First, higher educated employees get a short, internal course on what a cooperative is, and what that means, so that they are informed about the organisational context of their job. Sometimes courses are specially designed for employees who have contacts with members or elected officials. The emphasis regarding competence development for these employees is on the legal aspects of the cooperative.

Furthermore, new employees in the field of quality control, who first worked at a non-cooperative organisation, had to learn (though working with colleagues) a different attitude towards members with a small turnover, because they had to learn that they are just as well members of the cooperative.

Also, staff members may provide courses for different target groups within the cooperative. These employees then act as practical trainers, and have to learn to design and teach a course.

This, however, is not different from any other company which employ cascading models of learning, although the content of the course is specifically focused on the cooperative. Asked about a culture-specific feature of a cooperative, one interviewee mentioned the positive atmosphere (*'You are not trying to out-perform colleagues, but are trying to collaborate'*) and a good social policy; this pro-social policy of a cooperative is also applied to employees.

Discussion and conclusion

As stated above, entrepreneurship is a rich learning, meaningful, authentic learning environment. This holds for entrepreneurship within and outside a cooperative. The question was to what extent cooperatives have distinct features with respect to the facilitation of competence development. We have seen in the sections above that the answer to this question is nuanced. The uniqueness and value of competence development within cooperatives differs for the three stakeholder groups we have distinguished: members, elected board members and employees.

Members

This study shows that the cooperative is a rich learning environment for its members. They can get relevant and specific information in many different ways, for which the cooperative intranet is becoming increasingly important. Opportunities to learn via networks or in groups are abundantly available in all cooperatives, although collegial contacts via working groups are not equally intensive within all cooperatives; in some cooperatives these seem more prevalent than in others.

It also looks like that help with searching and choosing the appropriate information and the way of learning is widely present in the cooperatives, not only via the intranet, but also by individual consultancy. According to Koper and Tattersall (2004) support is important when it comes to learning.

The freedom of choice and own influence members have is important because this stimulates learning (Armson and Whiteley, 2010) and enables learning via own learning preferences. From diverse responses from the interviews it appeared that the own choice of the members is also very important. An on-going study of a cooperative to offer more courses from the

periphery, so members would feel more connected with the cooperative (Jussila and Tuominen, 2010), seems to be negatively received. Members seem to want the relationship with the cooperative limited to the core business, because they have other networks for learning. Both the NCR and Troberg (2000) called this independent attitude as being typical for a cooperative. Also, the high educational level of the Dutch agricultural entrepreneur and the previous work and internship experiences were mentioned as possible reasons for the cautious attitude towards training by the cooperative.

However, Verstegen et al. (2006) advocate courses for entrepreneurs. They indicate that it is meaningful to not put focus on the enterprise, but on the entrepreneur him/herself. By developing entrepreneurial competence, the enterprise is being developed. It looks as if members of a cooperative prefer to learn via excursions and one-time-only meetings.

Although the environment of the cooperative seems to be very suitable for learning of members, there appear to be very little differences in the required competencies compared to non-cooperative agro-food businesses. The competencies which were mentioned by the respondents all fall under the competence domains which were found by Verstegen and Lans (2006): 1. opportunity, 2. relationship, and 3. conceptual competencies. Organising, strategic and commitment competencies were not mentioned. The reason for that is not completely clear; maybe the questions were not clear enough, or these competencies are being used to a lesser extent by members of cooperatives, because the cooperatives carry out the tasks for which these competencies are more relevant. It is clear, however, that all respondents think that the cooperative does not have to cover everything regarding the members. Things which have to do with business management fall within the integrity of the members themselves.

Also entrepreneurship is for the greatest part the own responsibility of the entrepreneur, although this differs by cooperative; the sales cooperative is more heavily focused on this than the other cooperatives. Regarding members of the cooperatives, the emphasis is on the core process of the cooperative: craftsmanship. Competence development of members is mainly focused on this.

The conclusion is that for members of a cooperative, the added value of the cooperative is not in the skills being taught, but in the environment in which can be learned.

Members of the board

When members are elected to the board, they have to develop many new skills. These members choose for board membership, and their motivation to learn new competencies is

therefore high; they see it as an opportunity for personal development. The high motivation and the coaching from the cooperative seem to be particularly favourable for effective learning. This seems to be the most important difference regarding competence development compared with other companies. The difference focuses especially on: 1. social and communication skills for the interaction with both members, external board members and other stakeholders, 2. being able to work with people with other educational backgrounds and careers, 3. being able to network, 4. being able to bind people in a democratic way when there are different views, 5. being able to convince others, and 6. having organisational and cultural sensitivity within the cooperative.

Opportunities to develop these competencies are available in all cooperatives; board members can follow courses or get internal coaching by colleagues. Although some cooperatives seem to be more structured in this respect than others, all appreciate the importance of competent board members. What did not become quite clear is the importance of competence development after the expiry of the maximum board terms. For the elected board members, the way back to the regular occupation of member-entrepreneur does not always seem very logical, although examples of this do exist. Many however try to stay active in board circles, but it is not clear whether candidates always succeed in this. The return on investment of facilitating cooperative competence development for the cooperative is also not clear.

Employees

The results showed that all cooperatives realise the importance of proper training for their employees, and therefore they have structured training plans. Wadsworth (2012) indicates that good education and training for senior staff in a cooperative, is important for the economy. However, when looking at the results of this study, we conclude that a cooperative is not a unique learning environment for employees of the cooperative. Their learning environment is highly comparable to that of employees in non-cooperative settings. However, most employees get an induction programme about how the cooperative works. This obviously is specific for the cooperative.

Final conclusions

Regarding the main question of this study, whether cooperatives are distinct organizations with respect to the support of competence development of their members, and the three groups we have distinguished (members, elected board members and employees), we conclude that regarding competence development cooperatives pay most attention to their elected board members and that their employees get various facilities for learning and development. This corresponds with research done by Wadsworth (2012), who showed that most courses were followed by board, management and employees, and only a few by the members and the public. Apparently, for members of a cooperative the economic benefits of the membership are decisive, and not the competence development opportunities of the cooperative.

There are even counter-intuitive indications for undesired interference of cooperatives with the learning of members. As mentioned, courses for establishing stronger relationships between the cooperative and its members are sometimes even not desired by the members (Jussila et al, op cit). Nevertheless, they seem to take advantage of the rich informal learning environment which exists within the cooperative.

The results of this study should be interpreted with caution, because only a small number of cooperatives have been studied. It is striking however, that the study of Gijssels (2012) in Belgium and Canada came to the same conclusion that cooperatives are not very active in supporting human capital. Because of the small scale of our study, we did not differentiate between different types of cooperatives. Furthermore, only board members of cooperatives were interviewed and not regular members. This was done because we felt that board members (who have been and still are producer-members of the cooperative themselves) have a broad view on the competence development within the cooperative. It is possible that the opinions of the board members are biased towards the policy of the cooperative, although this is not very likely, given their simultaneous membership of the cooperative. Finally, no distinction was made between the different forms of boards, like board of directors and supervisory boards. There may be differences in required competences between these boards.

Despite the fact that cooperatives are an important factor in the economy, some cooperatives had to deal with declining membership. Loyalty and commitment play a role, but also vision, understanding of economic developments and the courage to take financial risks. The continued development of competencies could play a role in maintaining members. Therefore,

future research should look at a larger number of cooperatives, where the differences between the various cooperatives in objective and form of governance are included. Also, members should be asked what benefits they think they have of the cooperative regarding competence development, and how this compares with their self-regulated and even informal competence development. The emphasis in that respect could be on the extent to which there are promising development priorities in the competence profiles of members, and whether competence development can best be facilitated by the cooperative or by other innovation intermediaries, or that independent self-regulated and self-organised entrepreneurial learning in multiple networks (and not necessarily facilitated by the individual cooperative) has most potential.

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