

## Cultural cooperatives: between the social economy, art and sustainability.

Las cooperativas culturales: entre la economía social, el arte y la sostenibilidad.

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### Abstract:

Since the 19th century, cooperatives have emerged in different sectors in response to industrialisation and the need for workers to organise themselves, facilitating collaboration, a sense of community and mutual support. Similarly, cultural cooperatives have emerged as a vital response to the crisis that has affected the arts sector, an area that has suffered acutely from job insecurity. According to Towse (2005, p.61), "by working in the arts rather than in a comparable profession, artists suffer an income penalty of around 30%". In this context, cooperatives not only seek to generate a stable source of income and funding for their cultural projects, but also address broader needs, such as gaining institutional independence, autonomy and freedom with regard to their cultural production.

**Keywords:** Cultural cooperatives, Community, Collaborative work, Social economy, Sustainability.

### Resumen:

Desde el siglo XIX, las cooperativas han surgido en diferentes sectores como respuesta a la industrialización y la necesidad de los trabajadores de organizarse, facilitando la colaboración, el sentido de comunidad y apoyo mutuo. Del mismo modo, las cooperativas culturales han emergido como una respuesta vital ante la crisis que ha afectado al sector artístico, un ámbito que ha sufrido de manera aguda la precariedad laboral. Según Towse (2005, p.61) "al trabajar en las artes en vez de en una profesión comparable, los artistas sufren una penalización en sus ingresos de cerca del 30%". En este contexto, las cooperativas no solo buscan generar una fuente de ingreso estable y financiamiento para sus proyectos culturales, sino que también abordan necesidades más amplias, como ganar independencia institucional, autonomía y libertad respecto a su producción cultural.

**Palabras clave:** Cooperativas culturales, Comunidad, Trabajo colaborativo, Economía social, Sostenibilidad.

## Introduction

Cultural cooperatives are defined as organisations that operate under principles of cooperation and collaborative work to promote cultural, artistic, and creative activities. These initiatives seek not only economic benefit, but also community development and cultural sustainability. According to an assessment carried out by the Mexico City Ministry of Culture (2021, p.9), cultural cooperatives "emerge as a solution to the inequality generated by the capitalist economic system, proposing alternative practices to the current economic system".

Cooperatives allow artists to manage their own projects, promoting autonomy and empowerment. This creates an environment where artists can make decisions about their work and their income. They can also pool resources, which facilitates access to financing, workspaces and tools, as well as encouraging collaboration among members to develop joint projects. In a world where culture faces constant change and challenges, cooperatives can offer sustainable models that allow artists to adapt and thrive.

This article will analyse how cultural cooperatives play an important role in promoting art and their ability to benefit artistic production and the economic sustainability of artists through common funds in order to positively impact the community and encourage collaborative alliances between members of the same guild.

## Social economy and the cooperative model

Nolasco (2022) analyses the market economy and its impact on the social economy and establishes the following:

The naturalisation of the economy towards an exclusive form based on market logic – producing to sell – has led to other ways of doing economics encountering severe limitations in a world that has been configured for more than a century to pursue the accumulation of money, embedded in an economic environment that favours the reproduction of the market economy. (p.104)

Likewise, he argues that "it is in this context that the social and solidarity economy (SSE) presents itself as a systemic alternative to capitalism, given that it constitutes a form of organisation based on values related to the collective" (p.105).

Quintas (2006, p.3) defines the social economy as "the set of entities not belonging to the public sector, with democratic functioning and management and equal rights and duties for members, practising a special regime of ownership and distribution of profits, using surpluses from the financial year for the growth of the entity and improvement of services to the members of the society". In this way, the social economy could be considered a more democratic and equitable form of the economy among the members of a society. This is why this type of economy has become increasingly popular, mainly in European countries.

Mismo Quintas (2006, p.4) mentions that "the social economy includes non-profit organisations, such as foundations, and for-profit organisations, such as cooperatives," and it is on this second type of organisation that this article will focus. However, in either case, the same author specifies that "solidarity is the driving force behind the social economy, as the collective is at the basis of every initiative in this type of enterprise [...] Without the concept of collectivity, this type of organisation could not exist." (p.5) In other words, regardless of whether the objective is for-profit or not, the foundation and *raison d'être* of the social economy is the search for opportunities and access to resources in an egalitarian and equitable manner. In a world ruled by capitalism and a society with individualistic interests, a social economy that seeks collaborative and community work seems like a true oasis in a desert full of precariousness and elitism.

In his book *Creación de empresas de economía social: Planificación de un proyecto de cooperativa o sociedad laboral* (Creating Social Economy Enterprises: Planning a Cooperative or Worker-Owned Company Project), author Fernando Bruna Quintas (2006) breaks down the different types of social economy enterprises and makes the following point about the cooperative model:

Defined as "a society made up of people who join together on a voluntary basis and can leave at any time to carry out business activities aimed at meeting their economic and social needs and aspirations, with a democratic structure and functioning in accordance with the principles formulated by the International Cooperative Alliance (Manchester, September 1995):

- Principle of voluntary and open membership
- Principle of democratic management by the members
- Principle of autonomy and independence
- Principle of education, training and information
- Principle of cooperation among cooperatives
- Principle of community interest (p. 17)

It also mentions that there are up to 12 different types of cooperatives. In the case of a cultural cooperative, according to the author, it would be considered within the category of service cooperatives, which, he mentions, are those that bring together "natural or legal persons, owners of industrial or service businesses, and professionals or artists who are self-employed and whose purpose is to provide supplies and services, as well as to carry out operations aimed at the economic and technical improvement of the professional activities or businesses of their members" (p. 20).

In other words, a cultural cooperative is a group of artists, managers and/or people involved in cultural activities who seek to support each other as a community in order to achieve certainty, economic stability and freedom over their production

and their works. Cooperatives allow artists to manage their own projects, promoting autonomy and social cohesion among art creators. This creates an environment where artists can make decisions about their work and their income. They can also pool resources, which facilitates access to their own financing, workspaces and tools, as well as fostering collaborative alliances among members to develop joint projects. In a world where culture faces constant change and challenges, cooperatives can offer sustainable models that allow artists to adapt and thrive.

### **Cooperatives: from trade organisations to the present day**

Since the 19th century, cooperatives have emerged in different sectors in response to industrialisation and the need for workers to organise. This phenomenon is not new, as Williams (1994, p.55) points out, the genealogy of these organisations can be traced back to the guilds, brotherhoods or companies of the past, which were groups of artisans dedicated to the subsistence of their craft and the preservation of ancestral knowledge. An early example of this type of organisation can be found in the 14th-century Florentine guild of apothecaries and surgeons, which included painters due to the similarity of their working materials. These types of groups not only facilitated collaboration among workers, but also promoted a sense of community and mutual support.

In the field of the arts, Williams (1994, p. 55) mentions that in 1360 a special guild for artists was established, with compulsory membership. This model of organisation is reflected in England, where drama festivals and religious mystery cycles were produced in a distributed manner among the guilds. Here, we can see how cooperation has been fundamental to cultural and social development throughout history.

Furthermore, Mercado (2020, p.387) emphasises that "these projects are not only sustained by economic management, but also by the voluntary commitment of the residents who participate in different activities". This highlights the importance of community involvement, which goes beyond the economic sphere and where the active participation of citizens is crucial to the success of cooperatives.

On the other hand, economic independence is a key aspect of the self-management of these organisations. According to Mercado (2020, p.390), "economic independence is understood as not belonging to a state structure, not being affiliated with a political party, and not depending on a single source of funding." Thus, it is argued that the resources administered by the state belong to the citizens and not to the government, which implies that self-management is also a means of socially transforming the community.

Currently, countries such as France, Spain, and Brazil have developed cooperative models in the cultural sector that have proven successful. For example, the Sociétés de Production in France support independent filmmakers and visual artists,

and the Cooperativa Paulista de Teatro, where the theatre guild of São Paulo has joined forces for more than 30 years to strengthen the independent theatre movement.

Based on the above, it is clear that cultural cooperatives not only benefit their members, but also have a positive impact on their communities: they generate employment, foster social cohesion and promote collaborative work and the inclusion of vulnerable communities by making them feel part of the social movement itself.

Likewise, cultural cooperatives play a crucial role in promoting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) worldwide. According to UNESCO (2021), cultural cooperatives "promote cultural diversity and social inclusion" in line with SDG 11 (Sustainable cities and communities) and SDG 16 (Peace, justice and strong institutions). It goes on to mention that "these cooperatives provide spaces for communities to express their cultural identity and work on heritage preservation" as well as "help create jobs and promote the local economy", contributing to SDG 8 (Decent work and economic growth).

By working together, members of a cooperative can access resources, training and markets that would otherwise be inaccessible.

In conclusion, the history of cooperatives and their historical evolution, from guilds to contemporary organisations, shows that this model of social economy is not new, but has developed over the years, promoting collaboration and self-management not only for the economic sustainability of a community, but also for the strengthening of the social fabric, collaborative work and the vindication of citizens' rights.

## **Cultural cooperatives and their impact on artistic production.**

Cultural cooperatives have emerged as a vital response to the crisis that has affected the arts sector, an area that has suffered acutely from job insecurity. As Herrera, C. (2021) mentions in his article Cultural cooperatives and cooperative culture, a perfect symbiosis for a booming sector:

The cultural sector has been one of the most affected by the crisis, and in this context, something that had been evident for some time has become clear: the job insecurity suffered by workers, professionals and artists in this industry, characterised by the discontinuity of its projects, which, for its workers, translates into temporary and unstable employment, insufficient income, lack of social protection, vulnerability to companies and institutions, political vulnerability, etc. (para. 2)

This situation has highlighted the uncertainty faced by workers and artists. In this context, cooperatives not only seek to generate a stable source of income and funding for their cultural projects, but also address broader needs, such as gaining institutional independence, autonomy and freedom with regard to their cultural production.

From an economic perspective, Mercado, C. (2020, p. 380) mentions that "the now plural 'cultural policies' are considered tools for economic development, for the promotion of diversity or social cohesion, and for managing social risk in societies increasingly impacted by the consequences of neoliberalism." In this sense, cultural cooperatives, by operating under principles of self-management and collaboration, not only contribute to the job stability of their members, but also foster a creative environment where creativity and culture feed into each other.

Furthermore, cultural cooperatives enable the joint development of a single artistic sector or guild, generating higher quality and constantly evolving cultural products. As Herrera, C. (2021, para. 4) mentions, cooperatives are "horizontal structures where ideas, knowledge, tasks, etc. are shared and where all opinions are welcome and given equal value". The same author defines collaborative work between artistic groups as "work teams accustomed to flexibility in terms of working hours, who invest in their training and professional development, who value working with freedom and autonomy, etc. But who are also interested in what is happening in their environment and in society in general, launching projects that serve the common good," resulting in a more inclusive and dynamic work environment that has a positive impact on the quality of life and artistic production of each member of the cooperative community.

On the other hand, being a little less idealistic, it is known that cooperative models pose great challenges given the diversity of personalities, narratives and needs of the members of an artistic community or guild. Bringing everyone together under the same cooperative model can be quite a challenge. That is why, in order for these initiatives to thrive, it is essential to establish an appropriate legal framework that supports and facilitates the viability of these economic models. Without adequate legal support, cultural cooperatives could face obstacles that limit their ability to operate and grow. It is therefore essential to recognise that the role of cultural policies and the legal framework is crucial to the proper functioning of a cooperative, thus fostering a more resilient and equitable cultural sector, ensuring transparency and promoting artistic production and the well-being of creators.

## General Law on Cooperative Societies in Mexico

The Federal Law on Cooperative Societies in Mexico is a legal guide that establishes the rules for creating, organising and operating cooperatives in the country. Its main objective is to regulate how these organisations are constituted, how they operate, how they are dissolved and what the rights of their members are. In addition, its rules are mandatory throughout Mexico, as they seek to protect the social interest and well-being of the community.

Cooperatives are described as forms of social organisation formed by people who share common interests. These people work together based on principles of solidarity, self-help and mutual aid, with the aim of satisfying both individual and collective needs. They do this through economic activities such as producing, distributing and consuming goods and services.

The National Cooperative Movement includes the entire cooperative system and the institutions that provide technical support to these organisations throughout the country. The highest representative of this movement is the Higher Council of Cooperatives.

The Federal Law on Cooperative Societies in Mexico, in its latest reform published on 16 April 2025, establishes the following in its sixth article:

Cooperative societies must observe the following principles in their operations:

- I. Freedom of association and voluntary withdrawal of members;
- II. Democratic administration;
- III. Limitation of interest to certain contributions by members, if so agreed;
- IV. Distribution of returns in proportion to the participation of members;
- V. Promotion of cooperative education and education in the solidarity economy;
- VI. Participation in cooperative integration;
- VII. Respect for the individual right of members to belong to any political party or religious association;
- VIII. Promotion of ecological culture. (p.2)

The Law also establishes certain principles that cooperatives must follow in their operations, such as freedom to join and withdraw voluntarily, democratic administration, distribution of profits according to each member's participation, and promotion of education in solidarity economy and ecological culture. In addition, they respect the right of each member to belong to different political parties or religions.

On the other hand, cooperatives may engage in any legal economic activity they wish. For their creation, the Law states in Article 11 that:

- I. One vote per member is recognised, regardless of their contributions;
- II. They shall have variable capital;
- III. There shall be essential equality in the rights and obligations of their members and equal conditions for women;
- IV. They shall have an indefinite duration;
- V. They shall be composed of a minimum of five members, with the exception of those referred to in Article 33 Bis of this Law;



- VI. The admission of members may not be refused on the basis of ethnic or national origin, gender, age, disability, social status, health conditions, religion, opinions, sexual preferences, marital status or any other criterion that could give rise to discrimination;
- VII. They may not be part of or dependent on political parties or religious associations. To formalise the cooperative, members must prove their identity and confirm that they wish to create the cooperative by signing the memorandum of association before a notary public, either with their signature or fingerprint. (p.3)

This law is of utmost importance as it creates a legal framework that helps cooperatives to form, operate and grow in Mexico, promoting a solidarity-based economy and the well-being of their members and the community in general.

### **Cultural cooperatives and economic sustainability**

Today, the cooperative business philosophy and culture are based on values that promote self-management and the active participation of all its members. As Herrera (2021, para. 5) points out, "this way of working is based on principles such as voluntary membership, democratic management and equitable distribution of benefits, which fosters an environment where each individual can contribute and benefit fairly". This approach is not only beneficial to the organisation, but also aligns with the idea that art and culture should be accessible and accountable to society.

In this sense, Williams (1994, p.40) introduces the concept of the Artist Patron who, unlike the institutionalised artist, seeks to expand the arts as part of a public policy that prioritises social welfare. This type of patronage is not only a privilege, but also a responsibility that involves supporting others and contributing to the development of the community. Thus, a link is established between cooperative culture and art, where both seek the empowerment and autonomy of individuals.

Along the same lines, Towse (2005, p.717) mentions that "in economics, the adjective sustainable is used in multiple contexts [...], however, it is often associated with the word development." On this last point, the author continues, "velopment combines the ideas of sustainable economic development, understood not only as that which does not decline or run out, but also that which, in one way or another, perpetuates itself". In this sense, we could speak of an economy that is generates and self-cultivates through the constant and collaborative work of its members in pursuit of their own well-being beyond economic stability.

Along the same lines, Towse (2005) mentions:

Sustainable development implies an interpretation of economic development that goes beyond any previous notion of economic growth measured solely according to GDP per capita arguments. Thus, it is replaced by a broader concept of human development centred on the individual as the instrument and object of development, and measured through a variety of quality indicators and standards of living that go beyond the quantification of mere material progress (p.717).



In conclusion, the intersection of the social economy and the cultural cooperative model highlights the viability of economic sustainability, where collective work and social responsibility benefit a community as a whole. By adopting these principles, not only is the social fabric strengthened, but a more equitable economic model is also promoted, where the growth of each individual represents the overall development of a social sector.

### **The social impact of cultural cooperatives.**

Cooperativism has proven to be an effective model for socio-economic development, as pointed out by Torres, R. (2013, p.13), who highlights a point that is "fundamental to the principles of cooperativism, namely the labour exchange where the value of a product is determined according to the number of hours worked in its production". This approach not only promotes equity in the distribution of profits, but also encourages the active participation of members in the management of the cooperative. The same author goes on to mention that "some cooperatives implemented the return of profits, distributing part of the surplus according to the member's use of the service, which led to the successful replacement of currency with labour vouchers" (p.13).

Furthermore, the integration of these cooperative principles has had a significant impact on the quality of life of communities. Torres, R. (2013, p.15) mentions that "the integration of cooperative principles, which serve as a legacy for today's cooperativism, achieved gradual success, improving the quality of life not only of the 28 pioneers, but also of their families and communities." This legacy highlights the importance of a model that not only benefits individuals but also strengthens the social fabric.

Specifically referring to cultural cooperatives, the social impact is directly related to increased production, distribution, and access to artistic products in any discipline. A society with greater potential for integration and

develop collective cultural activities generates an extension of the social fabric beyond its own nuclei, fosters the generation of shared values, trust between individuals and collaborative work that strengthens any social bond.

It is clear that both cooperativism and cultural development are fundamental pillars that, when working together, can have a positive impact on the quality of life of communities. The promotion of these cooperative models is not only beneficial for individuals, but also contributes to the construction of more just and cohesive societies.

### **Conclusion**

Cultural cooperatives are truly valuable organisations for the communities or guilds that comprise them, as they not only promote artistic production, but also help artists to have a sustainable lifestyle, to generate collaborative alliances and to achieve economic stability that benefits their artistic work and promotes their overall well-being.

By pooling funds, cooperatives can offer financial support and resources that allow artists to focus on their creative work without necessarily seeking other sources of income. In addition, they encourage networking among members of the artistic community, which can lead to innovative, larger-scale projects with a highly positive impact on the community at large. It also helps society to have greater access to artistic products and even to play an active role in them.

It is important to mention that, in order to achieve a solid, successful and sustainable cooperative model, it is essential to have a clear legal framework that is structured and based on the specific needs of each community. This framework provides the necessary basis to ensure that actions are carried out fairly, equitably and in accordance with the law. It also helps to establish responsibilities and rights, which is essential for transparency, trust and cohesion among each of the individuals who make up a cultural cooperative.

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