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COMPLEX COOPERATIVE NETWORKS CASE STUDY: EMILIA ROMAGNA

All Roads Lead to Bologna:
Italian Cooperative Networks

Júlia Martins Rodrigues, Karen Miner, Sonja Novkovic



**Saint Mary's
University**

INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR CO-OPERATIVE MANAGEMENT

All Roads Lead to Bologna: Italian Cooperative Networks

The proverb "all roads lead to Rome" refers to the Roman Empire's road system converging to the capital, but as for Italy's cooperative system, Bologna takes the central role. The Emilia Romagna region has emerged as the homeland of Italian cooperation, displaying an impressive network of cooperatives that have successfully integrated their operations into the broader economy. This prominence is underpinned by the country's democratic foundations, which deeply influence both public and private legislation, extending to the national cooperative framework.

Emilia Romagna is home to over 4 million residents across nine provinces. As of 2023, its economy generated 163.652 billion euros in GDP (Statistica Regione Emilia-Romagna, n.d.). According to the Cooperative Registry of the Ministry of Italian Economic Development, the region currently hosts 5,681 active co-ops, constituting 5.7% of the country's cooperatives (Albo Cooperativo, 2024). The sector accounts for approximately a third of the region's GDP (Duda, 2016)— one of the densest cooperative economies worldwide—contributing to the overall local economic performance surpassing the national level (Alberani et al., 2019). The region holds the highest incidence of Italy's employed individuals in cooperatives (Legacoop, 2024). Fifty per cent of the major companies in the capital, Bologna, operate as either cooperatives or joint-stock companies under cooperative control (Negri & Zamagni, 2019).

Emilia Romagna is one of Italy's twenty regions. Despite their strong local identities and a certain level of autonomy, the country does not employ federalism as the government form. Still, the regions enjoy self-government and are politically integrated by a national policy of administrative centralization and parliamentary sovereignty (Putnam, 1993). After a period of fascism, the Constituent

Assembly instituted a democratic republic of civil law through a comprehensive constitution centered on personhood rights and social solidarity, which occupies a fundamental level within the country's normative order (Perlingieri, 1991).

Long before the Italian "constitutional legality" tradition (Perlingieri, 1991) and the modern cooperative-friendly policy framework, the country was the cradle of the Neapolitan School of Civil Economy, an intellectual tradition from the 18th Century embodying the paradigms of mutual assistance and reciprocity. The founder, Antonio Genovesi, laid the groundwork for an ethical and anthropological view of a market based on the promotion of the common good and societal well-being. Under this paradigm, economic and civil development is based on the needs of a person and the people through trust and reciprocity, ultimately leading to public happiness (Bruni & Zamagni, 2013). Adding a deeper humanistic layer to the market as the place for the practice of human virtues, the school of Civil Economy left a robust heritage in the Italian economic traditions that can be identified to this day in the Emilia Romagna cooperative economy.

Law and Policy: Ensuring Long-Term Sustainability

Article 45 of the Italian Constitution expressly recognizes the social function of cooperation: "The Republic recognizes the social function of cooperation with a mutualistic nature and without purposes of private speculation. The law promotes and encourages its growth through the most suitable means and ensures, with appropriate controls, its nature and purposes" (free translation from Italian). Recognizing the cooperative paradigm in the highest normative body emphasizes its long history and prominent role in Italy's socioeconomic fabric. It underlines cooperation as a fundamental tool of the democratization process based on mutuality and regional development (Vella, Genco, & Morara, 2018), constituting a

programmatic effort to ensure the effective participation of workers in the country's affairs (Buonocore, 1997).

The Italian legislation represents a long-standing, comprehensive, and well-established cooperative framework with a mosaic of multiple legislative sources in favor of their development. Before gaining constitutional recognition, Italian cooperatives were first formally systematized within the 1882 Codice del Commercio (Commercial Code) framework as one type of enterprise focused on the collaborative pursuit of shared interests among members. This recognition came from the gradual proliferation of cooperatives in various industries throughout the country, mainly in Northern Italy, during the second half of the Nineteenth Century.

Long before the post-WWII economic boom and democratization spurred the formation and growth of new cooperatives in the twentieth century, the Emilia Romagna region already hosted a strong cooperative movement in Northern Italy. Blending public and private affairs, self-management businesses began to organize themselves into a cohesive movement of mutual coordination and representation to guarantee the provision of primary goods (Borzaga, Depedri & Bodini, 2010).

Over time, cooperatives were subject to multiple reforms via a dynamic evolutionary process influenced by socioeconomic and political trends. The significance of each edge in Bonfante's metaphorical "cooperative triangle," characterized by variable geometry among "service management, democracy, and solidarity" (Bonfante, 2014), reflects the diversity of cooperative types, their objectives, and their market positioning. The multifaceted cooperative identity and the myriad legal sources in Italy allow their framework to be highly adaptive to the market and to build complex networks with their peers.

Two key nationwide policies regard the riserva legale (mandatory indivisible reserve) and mutual funds. Each cooperative enterprise is required to allocate at least 30% of its net profit to the indivisible reserve fund within its organization (the bylaws may provide for a higher percentage) and contribute 3% of their net income to centralized mutual funds for the promotion and development of cooperation, each managed by the five national associations representing, assisting, and safeguarding the cooperative movement (LEGACOOP, Confcooperative, A.G.C.I., U.N.C.I. and UNICOOP). Since 1977, earnings allocated to the mandatory 30% of indivisible reserves have been exempt from corporate taxes. However, some cooperatives allocate more than this percentage, even though the additional amount does not receive the same tax benefit.

Moreover, Italian cooperatives can access financial resources through investor members, known as soci sovventori, by issuing a type of privileged shares, referred to as azioni a partecipazione cooperativa. Cooperatives ruled as joint-stock companies or limited liability companies can issue different classes of financing shares with variable value to represent the participation of each member. The Civil Code establishes that the cooperative bylaws must regulate the patrimonial and administrative rights (e.g., distribution of profits, voting rights, repayment), imposing two constraints: the repayment cannot extend to indivisible reserves and the financing members' votes and representation in general meetings cannot exceed a third of all shareholders, regardless of the level of investment, to protect the democratic 'user' control. These policies have markedly enhanced the cooperatives' ability to access funds (Zamagni, 2016). The possibility of investor membership, while not the primary catalyst for financial accessibility, represents an additional strategy within the toolkit of the Italian cooperative system.

Built upon the principle of mutual assistance, the indivisible assets and mandatory

reserve funds provisions create a continuous capital pool that is instrumental in ensuring stability and sustainability. On one hand, the reserve can alleviate financial crises, finance new and existing cooperative development initiatives, and ensure co-ops remain financially sound, fulfilling their membership obligations. On the other hand, mutual funds guarantee a steady stream of resources, thereby sustaining the operation of major apex organizations that are instrumental in advancing the cooperative economy in the country. The mandatory 3% contributions are pooled into mutual funds that serve the broader cooperative sector. This arrangement transcends the individual cooperative's reserves, benefiting the entire movement by fostering growth and supporting startups within the ecosystem.

Honoring ICA's Principle 6

The reasons behind cooperative prominence in Emilia Romagna are multifaceted and deeply rooted in the socio-political and cultural history of the region, which has led to the establishment of a strong communal life and the sustenance of a close-knit cooperative network as a reflection of solidarity and cooperative values (Bonfante, 2014). The region showcases complex territorial articulations and the development of systemic support for cooperation through law and policies, contractual tools for coordination, and outstanding mechanisms of advocacy and representation.

In Emilia Romagna, cooperatives are tightly networked within their sectors, cross-sector, and as a movement. Cooperatives with various membership bases with activities in multiple sectors, including retail, construction, agriculture, housing, manufacturing, and social services, are primarily affiliated with LegaCoop, as well as the Associazione Generale Cooperative Italiane (AGCI) or the Confederation of Italian Cooperatives (Confcooperative). These national cooperative associations and federations, functioning as apex organizations, are autonomous organizations tasked

with representing the interests of their members and coordinating some operations as a network of networks (Menzani & Zamagni, 2010).

Since 2011, the three apex organizations have formed the Alliance of Italian Cooperatives (Alleanza delle Cooperative Italiane), a comprehensive grid of inter-cooperation that has been consolidated as the driving force of cooperative identity in the movement. This unifying body plays a fundamental role in coordinating the representation and advocacy efforts towards the Government, Parliament, European institutions, and social partners.

As of 2024, the Alliance represents more than 90% of Italian cooperatives, encompassing a network of 39,500 affiliated firms and over 12 million members, collectively impacting approximately 8% of Italy's GDP. (Alleanza, 2024). Its primary purpose is to strengthen cooperation among cooperatives and coordinate their collective actions as a mechanism of unified representation of sectors and regions.

With a rich network of overlapping and embedded associations and federations, Italian cooperatives partake in one of the world's most successful cooperative development systems, honoring the ICA Principle 6 of cooperation among cooperatives. This strategy embodies the principle's essence (Hénry, personal communication, 2023), which emphasizes that "cooperatives serve their members most effectively and strengthen the cooperative movement by working together through local, national, regional and international structures" (ICA, 1995). The long history of these second-tier cooperatives, with LegaCoop tracing back to 1886, is part of their protagonism and political relevance in the national cooperative movement. Few associations worldwide have had a comparable presence over the years.

Moreover, Emilia Romagna co-ops often build flexible manufacturing networks that

include small self-employed artisanal firms and family-owned firms in cooperative production systems primarily structured around industrial districts and urban industrial sub-systems (Capecchi, 1990; Restakis, 2007) that are highly specialized in niche products (Zamagni, 2019). This approach, known as the "fabbrica diffusa" or scattered factory model refers to smaller and medium-sized factories engaging in shorter production runs focused on manufacturing specific components instead of entire products and collaborating with other firms to assemble finished goods. These industrial districts are geographically defined productive systems (Pyke & Sengenberger, 1990) that have developed a diversified "cluster" model, employing a cooperative organizational structure that prioritizes teamwork and fosters multi-stakeholder relationships with subcontractors and customers.

These flexible manufacturing networks, prevalent in the machinery and artisanal industries, reflect a spectrum of formal and informal relationships and commonly lack a permanent lead coordinator. Leadership is fluid in these highly decentralized arrangements, moving between firms as necessary (Rinehart, 2009). Meanwhile, adhering to some consortia or cooperative groups also offers the flexibility to navigate a dynamic national and international market, sustaining competitiveness compared to non-cooperative firms. In some cases, workers of a large firm often establish independent spin-offs within the same industry, offering services to the parent company (Hancock, 2005).

Menzani and Zamagni's (2010) typology of Italian cooperative networks highlights how cooperatives have developed a tripartite network of market collusion, cooperative production, and extensive marketing agreements. This interconnected environment features horizontal arrangements across provincial consortia or co-op groups, allowing co-ops to access collective services and execute shared tasks, potentially integrating once-autonomous organizations.

Meanwhile, vertical networks streamline supply chains within specific industries (e.g., agriculture, construction, retail) to minimize transaction costs and enhance efficiency. Additionally, complementary networks offer a new, flexible avenue for cooperation among interrelated yet autonomous enterprises through complex consortia in large-scale projects like infrastructure development (Menzani & Zamagni, 2010).

Financial Networks

In Northern Italy, the first Italian popular banks (*banche popolari*) were established in 1864 under the principles of cooperation and mutualism, dedicated to supporting local communities and grassroots economic development. From the beginning, they deployed the cooperative ownership structure to serve networks of small and medium-sized enterprises, other co-ops, and individual customers. They reinvest their profits to benefit the community rather than distribute them to external shareholders. Inspired by the German network of cooperative banks, known as *Volksbank* or *Volksbanken und Raiffeisenbanken* (i.e., people's banks), these organizations experienced immediate success in the second half of the 19th century, capturing a quarter of the Italian credit market within a few years (Associazione Nazionale fra le Banche Popolari, n.d.).

Historically, these popular banks are known for their strong local ties and commitment to social responsibility. The year 2024 marks 160 years since the very first *Banca Popolare di Lodi* in Lombardia, reflecting a longstanding movement rooted in subsidiarity through decentralized operations at the local community level. Currently, they account for approximately 15% of the nation's banking branches and contribute around 150 million euros in profits to local areas, with small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) receiving 70% of the loans, inclusive of 30 billion euros in new funding for small businesses (De Luccia Lumeno, 2024).

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In addition to popular banks, smaller *casse rurali* or rural banks proliferated in the late 19th century with a hyper-local focus on agriculture and rural development. Since then, these cooperative banks based on social solidarity have been instrumental in leveraging funds for modernizing agri-food production and supporting communities in remote areas. Initially connected via the National Federation of Rural Banks, then through the Italian Federation of Rural Banks, and currently by the ICCREA - Istituto di Credito delle Casse Rurali e Artigiane (i.e., a second-tier central banking institution), they have consistently organized themselves independently and voluntarily through collective bodies for representation and technical assistance (Tortia & Sacchetti, 2023). A 2016 reform introduced the Cooperative Banking Group (CBG) to centralize governance and services through a joint-stock parent company, enhancing integration and stability among member co-ops.

Under this paradigm, two main groups dominate the Italian cooperative banking sector: the BCC Group ICCREA and the Cassa Centrale Banca. The BCC Group ICCREA has reached 130 cooperative banks through a cohesion contract, serving 824,610 cooperative members in the country (Tortia & Sacchetti, 2023). In Emilia Romagna alone, BCC has 231 associated branches (BCC Group, n.d.). The group allocates at least 70% of the annual net profits to the legal reserve and 3% to mutualistic funds for the promotion and development of cooperation, with the remaining profits destined for charitable or mutualistic purposes (BCC Group, n.d.). Meanwhile, the Cassa Centrale, the second largest group in Italy, currently aggregates 66 cooperative credit banks (seven in Emilia Romagna) with a consolidated net income of 871 million euros (Cassa Centrale Banca, n.d.).

The robust cooperative banking system, widely established across the Emilia-Romagna region and beyond, exhibits high institutionalization. This framework rooted in many decades of system design and legislative reforms, has led to well-structured

intra-network relations under an intricate governance design. This process has, so far, ensured sector stability and allowed the cooperative banks to keep their local focus and lean operations backed by a supporting institutional umbrella.

Final remarks

Emilia Romagna region stands out as the premier example of a genuine cooperative economy, characterized by its extensive networks of mutual support and a comprehensive infrastructure designed to meet diverse sectoral needs. In this scenario, the cooperative sector operates independently, primarily functioning within its exclusive cooperative networks.

Reproducing the unique conditions that fostered Emilia Romagna cooperatives' success may be challenging, largely due to their deep-rooted commitment to the model over generations. However, the key lessons from their experience—highlighting the benefits of tightly knit networks and consistent resource allocation—are fundamental for understanding how well-structured systems can sustainably drive inter-cooperation.



PINPOINTING KEY ELEMENTS

Which components are currently present in Emilia Romagna's cooperative economy?

MEANS OF ORGANIZATION (WHAT)

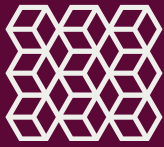
Informal Collaborations: Emilia Romagna's flexible manufacturing networks feature a mix of formal and informal relationships.

Co-op to Co-op Business: Beyond the scattered factory model, local cooperatives engage in consortia, fair trade chains and purchases (e.g., CoopItalia's Solidal line of fairtrade products).

Second Tier Co-ops: The leading second-tier cooperative in Emilia Romagna is LegaCoop, with many regional co-ops also affiliated with AGCI and Confcooperative.

Co-op Groups: Emilia Romagna is home to co-op groups like Terre Cevico and Caviro, with the latter being Italy's largest wine cooperative by market share.

Multi-stakeholder Networks: Regional networks incorporate small artisanal businesses and family-owned firms into their production systems. Additionally, on a national scale, they connect with the broader Alliance of Italian Cooperatives, which includes co-ops with diverse membership structures.



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PURPOSE

To leverage resources: Cooperatives allocate 3% of net income to mutual funds for development and mobilize members for crowdfunding, using bottom-up lending to finance major expansions, such as Coop's growth in the 80s and 90s.

To reduce costs: Networks reduce transaction costs through decentralization and avoid merger expenses. The Consorzio del Formaggio Parmigiano-Reggiano lower costs by coordinating collective marketing and regulatory compliance, sharing expenses among partner co-ops.

To align strategically: Historically, the connection among major cooperative umbrella organizations has strengthened the co-op movement across Italy, extending its impact beyond Emilia Romagna and enhancing shared infrastructure and resources.

To provide public goods: Social cooperative networks in Emilia-Romagna have advanced community health and social services, while local networks have improved food security through sustainable farming.

To achieve economies of scale: Regional co-ops and groups have reached international markets through partnerships that enhance flexibility and specialization, achieving economies of scale without over-centralization.

To spread awareness: Co-ops not only embrace their local cooperative identity but also collaborate globally with research centers and organizations to promote their networking model, welcoming foreign delegations and study visits, such as LegaCoop's Welcome Coop service.



PINPOINTING KEY ELEMENTS

Which components are currently present in Emilia Romagna's cooperative economy?

AGENTS

Co-ops (Networks Themselves): One of the densest cooperative economies worldwide with 5,962 active cooperatives in the region.

Co-op Developers, Consultants & Leaders: The province features a wealth of human capital in cooperative studies, with leading scholars, specialized service providers, and developers from umbrella organizations actively contributing to the sector.

Regulators and Policymakers: Emilia-Romagna networks thrive with the backing of a partner state, where public sector representatives are committed to enhancing the provincial cooperative economy.

Educational Institutions: ER Education and Research Emilia-Romagna, alongside universities such as Bologna and Parma (*Università di Parma's* International Centre for Research on Cooperatives), forms a regional talent development hub that fosters socioeconomic innovation.

Social Economy Enterprises: Beyond co-ops, the region is marked by SMEs across multiple sectors. The EU's European Regional Development Fund has actively supported the creation of social enterprises. Youth and family collectives are prevalent in this sector.

Common Interest Groups & Civil Society Organizations: Diverse groups and grassroots movements, focusing on social aid, cultural management, and fair employment for vulnerable communities, often start as informal associations before evolving into social cooperatives.

Communities of Practice: Over its long history of cooperation, many supporting groups have formed, some transitioning from informal gatherings to established associations, such as AICCON – Associazione Italiana per la promozione della Cultura della Cooperazione e del Nonprofit.

International Bodies: Through Alleanza delle Cooperative Italiane, which is a member of the ICA, Emilia Romagna's cooperatives connect to the international community. Also, strong EU-level relationships and support.



PINPOINTING KEY ELEMENTS

Which components are currently present in Emilia Romagna's cooperative economy?

FUNCTIONS

Providing technical support and capacity building: Programs offered by local universities, federations, and partner organizations are specifically designed to provide young cooperatives with technical support, emphasizing capacity building within this innovative ecosystem.

Implementing co-op friendly laws and policies: Constitutional recognition of co-op's social function; Civil Code, Commercial Code, and related legislation address adequate treatment and promote cooperative-friendly policies for long-term sustainability (e.g., legal reserves, mutualistic funds).

Representing and advocating: The network of second-tier cooperatives, facilitated by the Alliance of Italian Cooperatives, plays a critical role in connecting the cooperative movement with the public sector, actively lobbying for policies and regulations that support co-op growth/sustainability.

Educating and researching: LegaCoop and the University of Bologna have formalized a cooperation agreement for research and training, focused on technology transfer and facilitating the engagement of graduates into the development of new cooperative enterprises.

Incubating and accelerating co-op growth: The region, hosting 12% of the nation's incubators such as Confcooperative's CoopUP, LegaCoop's Coopstartup, and InnovaCoop, plans to enhance its system under the Regional Program of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF).

Convening and building relationships: Open Innovation Program, Startup Day, and a range of sector-specific events have significantly enriched the networking landscape. Also, intrinsic to the flexible manufacturing networks' framework, co-ops place a high emphasis on cultivating local relationships.

Financing: Shared pool of resources, including mutual funds and indivisible and reserves; cooperative banks, all provide development capital; cooperatives also have access to public grants; social coops benefit from public procurement.



PINPOINTING KEY ELEMENTS

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CONTEXT VARIABLES

History and path dependence: Emilia Romagna's cooperative movement can be traced back to the late 19th century, including its networks. The most prominent cooperative association, LegaCoop was founded in 1886.

Embeddedness and social cohesion: Regional cooperatives have successfully integrated their operations into the broader economy.

Co-op density: With 5,681 active cooperatives making up 5.7% of the country's total, the region leads in cooperative employment rates and houses half of Bologna's major firms operating as co-ops or cooperative-controlled joint-stock companies.

Macro culture: Civil Economy tradition; social function of cooperation recognized by the Italian Constitution; social solidarity rooted in Catholic traditions.



PINPOINTING KEY ELEMENTS

Which components are currently present in Emilia Romagna's cooperative economy?

OUTCOMES

Sustainable development: Co-ops supported communities hit by the 2023 floods following a severe drought, highlighting the public debate on sustainability. The Regional Energy Fund boosts the low-carbon economy, with some networks achieving 100% energy self-sufficiency.

Social and economic resilience: The sector has had a stabilizing influence on the local economy with consistently high employment rates in cooperatives. The region boasts low-income inequality, as well as high levels of social capital.

Creation and sustainability of cooperatives: In 2021, Agci, Confcooperative and Legacoop signed an agreement with Italy's largest trade union organizations to promote cooperative worker buyouts. In 2022, the public sector awarded over 140,000 euros to 17 new and existing co-ops.

Intergenerational infrastructure: The existing infrastructure, which includes umbrella organizations, customized programs, appropriate policies, and beyond, establishes a groundwork that underpins a long-term vision aimed at future generations of cooperators, rather than just tackling short-term issues.



MAPPING LINKS AND INTERACTIONS

How does the unique interplay among these key elements unfold in the region?

At a base level, small and medium-sized cooperatives operate independently or within local flexible manufacturing networks. Either way, most of them are integrated into the membership of a second-tier cooperative, primarily LegaCoop. Associations and federations aggregates sector-specific networks into different branches of activity. On a national scale, LegaCoop partners with AGCI and Confcooperative to form the Alliance of Italian Cooperatives. Similarly, small financial cooperatives like the banche di credito cooperativo (BCCs) and the casse rurali connect to regional federations under the Federazione Italiana delle Banche di Credito Cooperativo – Casse Rurali ed Artigiane.

IDENTIFYING GAPS AND DEFICIENCIES

What gaps and deficiencies exist within the network?

Emilia Romagna is a thriving and resilient cooperative economy. Yet, cooperatives are not a panacea for the socio-economic system and remain susceptible to contemporary adversities. The severity of the 2023 floods caused an estimated €8.8 billion in damage and significant infrastructural degradation. Coupled with seismic activity, droughts, the last pandemic outbreak, and the ongoing European crisis, even the healthiest economies are subject to the pressures exerted by such environmental and geopolitical events. Emilia Romagna's celebrated networks have been put to a rigorous test and must adapt to a rapidly changing landscape. Emilia Romagna's cooperatives might need to create a specific coordination body to address climate change and environmental issues.



DEPLOYING THE FIVE PRINCIPLES FOR SUSTAINABLE AND RESILIENT NETWORKS

Emilia Romagna

Emilia Romagna represents one of the densest cooperative economies worldwide. Unlike other social solidarity ecosystems, the region is primarily centered on cooperative enterprises including social cooperatives, which are connected through extensive network of networks across multiple sectors. These cooperatives are organized into horizontal, vertical, and complementary networks of mutual support, yet each cooperative operates autonomously without a central governing body. Apart from some prominent groups, most coops are small and medium-scale enterprises rooted in the territory and focused on lean operations. The networks are well-established, with formal membership and contractual agreements. This high level of institutionalization and embeddedness has created a positive co-dependence among all cooperative and non-cooperative participants, nurturing a shared commitment to the movement. The configuration of the Alleanza delle Cooperative Italiane as a comprehensive grid of inter-cooperation highlights the diversity and abundance of Italian institutional anchors, such as LegaCoop, AGCI, and Confcooperative, serving as central nodes of network activity nationwide. Collectively, these overarching associations and federations have effectively established and upheld a concrete support system for their members and future generations of cooperatives.

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