Elena Como, Francesca Battistoni

Collaborative economy and innovation in cooperative enterprises: emerging opportunities and challenges for the future

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Abstract

The collaborative economy defines a new organizational and business model that uses digital platforms to connect distributed groups of people and allow them to exchange goods and services in a direct and simple way, with very limited intermediation. Such model has seen a significant boom in the past few years, mainly thanks to the rapid growth of some platforms, which proved the enormous potential of the model in terms of market and commercial value. However, other experiences that tried to use the platform model for social and solidaristic objectives tended to remain less visible. This contribution aims to shed light on the aspirations and potential of the collaborative economy for cooperative enterprises, and to discuss how these may make use of such model or adopt some of its elements, carefully adapting them to their own objectives and identity. At the end of the analysis, we also try to discuss some of the future challenges and to highlight the main critical issues that will need to be further investigated and discussed, both inside and outside the cooperative circles.

Keywords: sharing economy, collaborative economy, platform model, cooperative, social cooperative, social enterprise
The collaborative economy does not refer to a clearly delimited and defined concept, but rather to a wider and more varied set of practices, which are inherently similar because of the use of the “platform model” and digital technologies to make people connect and allow exchanges and peer collaboration. Generally speaking, collaborative economy platforms foster the encounter between on the one hand those who own resources but do not use them entirely (and therefore wish to share or exchange them), and on the other hand those who need such resources (and are thus interested in connecting with people owning them). Exchanged resources can be of different types: goods, spaces and other material resources, but also intangible resources like competences and knowledge, which are made available to potentially interested people in order to maximise their value and social utility.

The origin of the collaborative economy dates back to the 1990’s, but its boom took place only in the second half of the years 2000S, when new technologies potentials met a growing demand for change of the global social-economic model. In those years, in fact, economic crisis, with its systemic nature and the bias against dominant neo-liberal paradigms, favoured the origin and the gradual development of “alternative” forms of economy, based more on the individual, the sharing, the complete and efficient use of resources, thus creating an ideal environment for the development of collaborative practices.

The vast complex of collaborative economy practices includes activities that are extremely different the one from the other: web platforms fostering peer-to-peer exchange of goods and services, actions linked to the development of open source softwares, time banks, alternative peer-to-peer finance, co-working, fab lab, makers’ activities, and much more. In these contexts, exchange and sharing modalities vary considerably, sometimes they are totally voluntary and free, other times they can be provided through traditional market mechanisms, such as rent and sell (therefore, in order to have access to a certain resource, you have to pay).

Generally speaking, the most characteristic element of the collaborative economy platforms is the fact that they are peer-to-peer, i.e. originated in order to foster a collaboration among peers circumventing the majority of those structures that traditionally intermediate exchanges and social and economic relations.

Another characteristic aspect of the collaborative platforms is the use of digital technology in order to foster direct exchanges, thus creating first of all matching opportunities between supply and demand that are more rapid and flexible than traditional ones, whose transaction costs are extremely low, and allowing also the connection between distant and unknown people, thus enlarging the circle of interactions and knowledge. This aspect is extremely interesting, if we consider that some types of exchanges traditionally happen only among persons that know each other and among whom there are strong interpersonal relations based on mutual faith (e.g. lending a good, hosting somebody in their own house, sharing food) (Schor, 2014). Precisely because they create relations and exchange among strangers, collaborative economy platforms can become a vehicle for new social relations, thus promoting meetings and socialization, and sometimes creating “communities” or shared identities. It is not a case that users of those platforms are encouraged to share information on themselves and on their own interests, or to access the service directly using their profile on social networks.

Most well-known and accredited definitions of collaborative economy¹ (European Commission, 2013; NESTA, 2014; Wosskow, 2014) identify as key features of the phenomenon the technological and peer-to-peer element; moreover there is the general tendency to gather the empirical practices along five categories²: collaborative consumption, collaborative production, collaborative learning, collaborative finance, collaborative governance (Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Collaborative Consumption</th>
<th>It refers to platforms through which it is possible to share, swap, rent, sell or donate goods and services among peers.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative Production</td>
<td>It aims at applying the principles of widespread opening and collaboration (that are already typical of open software movements) to the development and manufacture of physical products, thanks to knowledge exchange and the creation of open labs where machinery and technological tools can be shared (e.g. 3D printers).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative Learning</td>
<td>It consists of practices of shared knowledge such as courses, seminars and scientific or educational contents that are created, shared and available to everyone. Some examples are Wikipedia and MOOC, Massive Open Online Courses for distance learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative Finance</td>
<td>It refers to new financial models in which the peer-to-peer dimension and the use of technological platforms allow people to directly provide or get a loan or a funding among peers. Typologies of collaborative finance range from crowdfunding to crowdsourced equity, from peer-to-peer lending to mini-bonds connected to SMEs and alternative currency payments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborative Governance</td>
<td>It refers to new horizontal and participative models of governance, used within enterprises and organisations or at an urban level, in order to foster citizens’ participation to public policies, with particular reference to urban regeneration and common goods management.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. With some precedents, as proved by the fact that in 1978 a paper by Felson and Spaeth (Felson, Spaeth, 1978) made reference to “Community structure and collaborative consumption”. However, “collaborative consumption” to which it refers is remarkably different from those that is discussed nowadays, especially because of the lack of the technological element, which is one of the key aspects of modern cooperative models.

2. For example, we can think about the couchsurfing community or the way in which Airbnb started to enhance the sense of “community” among its hosts, through the creation of groups or meetups.
Despite evident similarities, the collaborative economy associates experiences and empirical cases that are very different from the one of the economy. It identifies in turn different aspects of the same phenomenon. This variety of terms may lead to a certain confusion, and arouse contrasting feelings among the public of observers and stakeholders of the collaborative economy, because every definition carries important deviations of meaning, and there is a debate on the controversial impacts of some phenomena (for example, the topic of on-demand economy) (Gray, 2014; Rampell, 2015).

In this paper we will make reference to the "wider" definition of collaborative economy that has been recently presented, but we will make a meaningful distinction between:

- bottom up experiences of collaborative economy of a more civic and social nature, which provide an answer to the crisis through an alternative economy, and which use digital technologies to foster collaborative dynamics of a mutualistic and solidaristic kind (e.g. time banks, couchsurfing, social street etc.);
- models of enterprise-platform that can be placed more on a market level, which use technological innovation mainly to gain economic value from widespread resources and generating low cost opportunities of consumption (e.g. wide platforms such as Uber and Airbnb).

Even the latter model can be considered as a form of collaborative economy, to the extent that it creates new ways of making peers meet and be involved; the stake of its social innovation, however, is usually inferior to the former case, since it favours market logics and models of enterprise that are more similar to the traditional ones.

### Why bringing together collaborative economy and cooperative enterprises?

This paper aims at comparing and putting into relationship the phenomenon of the collaborative economy and the universe of cooperative enterprises, in order to realize whether an interaction between them can be envisaged; more specifically, it is interesting to understand whether it is possible to "use" collaborative economy as an innovation model for cooperatives.

It is immediately evident that there are some common elements between cooperatives and collaborative economy, both at a linguistic and inherent level. The terminology itself emphasizes this similarity: "sharing" economy, "collaboration" economy, "cooperation". Undoubtedly, we are on the same ground, i.e. the domain of an economy that considers "people" as a fundamental resource and "collaboration" or "cooperation" as the most efficient, effective and sustainable way of "making economy" and addressing needs.

On the other hand, as we have already emphasised, the paths and the models characterising the collaborative economy are not always the same. Keeping in mind the distinction previously suggested, we can state that cooperatives are more similar to those bottom up experiences of collaborative economy where citizens decide to organise themselves by using digital technologies in order to promote solidaristic dynamics, while they are generally different from the models of platform enterprise - which are considered forms of collaborative economy as well - but which, comparing to cooperatives, have less collaborative range and show more critical issues from a social point of view.

The comparison between cooperatives and collaborative economy is, on the whole, not a simple one. First of all, this is due to the differences between historical and structural characteristics of the former (which consolidated as a form of enterprise a century and a half ago), and, for the time being, more fluid and indefinite characteristics of the latter (referring more to a model of service than to a specific form of enterprise). In order to establish an effective comparison, therefore, we will try to keep the two levels separated: on the one hand the forms of enterprise ("cooperative" vs "collaborative platform") and on the other hand the wider paradigms or socio-economic models to which they make reference ("cooperation" vs "collaborative economy").

Regardless of the level of comparison, we can thus summarise central questions to fuel further reflection:

1. Compared to the historical background, social and economic roots, and future development prospects of cooperative enterprises, should the collaborative economy be seen more as a threat or an opportunity? Is there a risk that emerging collaborative platforms could sweep away the historic cooperative model, and to what extent is it probable or desirable that, on the contrary, some forms of synergy of positive interaction occur?
2. Under which profiles can we imagine their possible interaction and mutual contamination, and which are the possible consequences for cooperatives? Which prospects are emerging for innovation in cooperatives and how can we transform new challenges into opportunities? Which is the...
role played by factors such as, for example, regulatory, finance and dynamics of cultural change?

Before dealing with these issues in the Italian contexts and relating the results of a recent research on this topic, we would like to briefly hinting at the international debate.

The international debate

Possible contaminations between cooperation and the collaborative economy were also tackled on an international level. The most known lines of thinking are those referring to concepts of open cooperativism (Conaty, 2014; Conaty, Bollier, 2014) and platform cooperativism (Scholz, 2014; Schneider, 2014, 2015). In both movements, authors deal with the possible convergence and synergy between the cooperative movement and the collaborative economy, with particular emphasis on forms of peer production as means to re-direct current economy and renew cooperation, thus building new forms of political and economic power that are external to the duopolistic logic Market/State.

Open cooperativism focuses on the potentials of peer production and on the movement of the commons in order to innovate cooperation and originate economic and social forms that are at the same time alternative and sustainable. Conaty and Bollier assume that the cooperative movement really needs to understand and exploit new digital forms of organisation, while citizens need to develop new institutions and juridical structures capable of protecting their own resources and communities from the capital logic (Conaty, Bollier, 2014).

Open cooperativism suggests that a convergence between cooperativism and commons will be useful to face two unsolved issues: the problem of means of subsistence and work in a commons-based economy (traditionally weak from these points of view) and the need on the part of cooperatives to develop new organisational forms enhancing the potentialities of the digital. And the answer to this dual need may be provided, at least on a transitory level, by a new wave of “open” cooperativism, which authors define as a new sector linking the ability of pooling and redistributing resources of commons movement, with the need to generate sustainable economy and cooperatives means of subsistence.

Among possible instruments and paths to realize this transformation, authors identify: the constitution of new multistakeholder cooperatives, the development of strategies to implement systems of complementary currencies, the development of new management models of common resources (such as cooperative based social housing and new uses of the territory), the creation of synergies between open network platforms (such as crowdfunding and crowdsourcing) and cooperative structures with a social base, or the development of innovative partnerships between citizens and administrations for the management of common goods. In the transition phase in which European cooperative movement finds itself, authors lay the foundations to search new forms of link and relation inspired by peer production, and innovating the production and the management of common goods, forms that can contaminate cooperative world and regenerate it by using new instruments, even technological ones.

Instead, platform cooperativism originated with the aim to denounce and offer a (cooperative) alternative to the phenomenon of the so-called platform capitalism that is infiltrating inside collaborative economy. The term “platform cooperativism” was coined by Sasha Lobo to define the spread of wide capitalistic platforms that define themselves - or are defined - as collaborative economy, but which have little to do with collaboration and shared value creation, because they exploit the potentialities of technologies and peer-to-peer markets with the aim to extract value from the distributed resources of citizens, and realize a profit that is to be accumulated in the hands of few people (the owners of the platform) (Lobo, 2014). It is, therefore, a consideration on the limits of the American model of the sharing economy (especially of platforms of on-demand work) that is rapidly developing in the Silicon Valley.

According to the movement of platform cooperativism, growing platforms of collaborative economy should distance themselves from platform capitalism and learn from the cooperative model in order to be recognised as real social value creators. First of all, this means Promoting the shared property of the platform in cooperative terms, and then adopting a clear regulation on the working forms. Moreover, a crucial aspect of platform cooperativism concerns the generation of the valuable social relations, the careful relation with the territory and the attention towards social impact.

In general, platform cooperativism wishes to maintain technology as the pulsing heart of the platform model, but it transforms governance by entrusting it to a cooperative organisation. There are cases of cooperatives where workers share the property of the platforms where they sell their work (es. Stocksy), or cases in which the
prosumers also own the platform (e.g. Fairmondo, the online supermarket where both customers and producers are owners).

By focusing the debate on governance and on the problems stemming from a weak regulation of platforms, platform cooperativism suggests some principles of self-regulation: cooperative platforms should be open source, governance should be democratic and the platform should use the blockchain technology as a means of shared control. In our opinion, the topic presented here is extremely relevant, especially in the American context where the main platforms reproducing the capitalist model originated, but in the future it will surely become more urgent also in Europe, where on the other hand, thanks to the cooperative and solidaristic tradition (especially in certain countries, such as Italy), a different path of more social attention seems possible and desirable.

**Collaborative economy and cooperatives in Italy**

We will now focus our debate on the collaborative economy and cooperatives in Italy, but before it is necessary to estimate the overall scale of the phenomena and their general features.

In 2015 we can count about 80 thousand cooperative enterprises in Italy, operating in different sectors such as services, agriculture, commerce, building, industrial manufacture, credit etc. Approximately 43 thousand of them adhere to ACI - Italian Cooperatives Alliance - and they include 12 million members, an aggregated turnover of 140 billion euros and more than 1 million 300 thousand people employed (ACI, 2015). The scale of the cooperative phenomenon in Italy, therefore, is remarkable and deeply rooted in the territory, as shown by its long history and by its resilience during the years of the economic crisis.

The collaborative economy, on the other hand, is a very recent phenomenon and it is still hard to quantify it. The mapping realized in 2015 by Collaboriamo.org, with the support of PhD Italy, noticed 118 collaborative platforms, Italian and foreign with at least one office in Italy (Collaboriamo.org, 2015). Mapped platforms operate in different sectors such as transports, tourism, exchange of consumer goods, social services, but also some emerging sectors like culture. The research show a inhomogeneous geographical distribution of these platforms on the Italian territory and suggests that the collaborative economy developed especially the North. However, this data could be distorted by the mapping method, which was mainly based on internet searches and on the mobilisation of existing networks of word of mouth, and could thus represent specific networks that do not efficiently reach the South. At the same time, it cannot be excluded that the collaborative economy, as defined in the mapping (digital platform) is weaker in the South, where different form of solidarity and economic and social networks prevail.

According to the results of a sample analysis realised on 55 of the 118 mapped platforms (those that answered to the survey), more than the half (56%) takes the form of a limited company, while 26% of them are innovative and specifically registered start-ups. The percentage of sole proprietorships is low (5%), as it is the presence of cooperatives (3%). The survey did not throw light on platforms constituted as associations or non profit organisations (Collaboriamo.org, 2015).

Sticking to the results of the survey, Italian collaborative economy seems to be driven more by capital companies, than by forms that were previously defined as “civic” or bottom-up. Platforms are generally promoted and managed by groups of 2-3 persons (this, according to the analysis, is the average number of “founders”), highly educated and innovative entrepreneurs (usually, but not necessarily, graduated in Engineering or Economy), who sees opportunities for business - and at the same time for social impact - in the creation of a tool that is made available to interested people, so that they can use it to realize exchanges. Instead, it seems that crowds tend not to self-organise nor to create platforms in order to coordinate themselves and collaborate through a collective bottom up action. More research of the origin of such platforms and on the drivers pushing both founders and users is extremely desirable and interesting in order to understand which phenomena hinder the development of bottom up platforms (or their translation into formalised realities that can be included in this kind of mapping).

The prevalence of capitalistic (limited liability) companies among collaborative platforms makes the debate on the positioning of cooperatives with regards to the topic particularly important and stimulating. Cooperatives, in fact, are not conventional enterprises, but rather collective enterprises: in a capitalistic landscape dominated by platforms with a reduced governance, can cooperatives find a way to become promoters of alternative models, with a wider and shared property? What could their experience of aggregation of needs and competences bring to the community? How can they endorse the fact of being rooted in the territory? What should they learn and how should they change in order to emerge and open to new horizons?
Paths of mutual innovation

The Italian cooperative movement recently began to show interest in the collaborative economy. The topic attracted the attention of associative organisations (Legacoop, Confcooperative, ACI) and of some cooperative enterprises that were particularly interested in innovation and transformative trends in action. However, the debate is starting to become mainstream only now, which is rather obvious given the recent nature of the phenomenon.

Starting from this need of confrontation and debate, in 2015 Unipolis Foundation12 and Generazioni-Legacoop13 promoted a research aimed at framing the phenomenon of the collaborative economy and analysing its possible implications in cooperative enterprises. By providing data, definitions, and a common conceptual framework, the research “From sharing economy to collaborative economy: the impact and the opportunities for the cooperative world” aroused a wider debate on the collaborative economy and encouraged cooperatives to question on how this can be a stimulus to develop internal innovation (Unipolis Foundation, 2015).

The research identified different elements typical of the collaborative economy, which can be interesting for cooperatives and act as a stimulus for innovation paths:

- **The use of digital technologies and social networks.** They are key instruments used by collaborative economy platforms to mobilize and enhance dormant resources, to involve communities in new forms of relationship, to increase flexibility, speed and innovation of services and organisational models, and thus address the needs in a more and more efficient way. The use of technology is a domain where cooperative enterprises can learn from collaborative platforms, with great advantages also in terms of efficiency and attractiveness for young people.

- **Peer-to-peer model or collaboration practices among peers.** Peer-to-peer interaction models promoted by collaborative economy may suggest incentives for a renewal of cooperative mutuality, especially where the community naturally expresses a strong potential in the form of bottom-up mutual help, and where there is a demand for disintermediation and direct relationship that cannot be satisfied by traditional services. Obviously, peer models cannot totally replace the existing forms of the cooperative model (based on the sharing of a stable entrepreneurial project among members, who together form a cooperative enterprise to produce goods, services and - most importantly - jobs), but it can provide complementary forms of reciprocity in which the cooperative takes on a new role as an “enabling platform” of peer relations.

- **The strengthening of governance models.** Collaborative economy platforms are starting to reflect on this topic, a domain in which cooperatives on the other hand have a lot to offer, thanks to their own history and nature of collective enterprises. The lessons of the cooperative tradition to the collaborative economy is crucial also in the light of the already mentioned platform cooperativism concept, but requires that cooperatives as well improve their capacity to face some key challenges. Among them, the challenge of digital participation and of the involvement of groups on a wider scale (on collaborative platforms, in fact, there are thousands of people already cooperating, with an extremely rapid growth and almost total lack of physical or geographical barriers). Moreover, cooperatives willing to exploit the model of collaborative platforms should know how to manage more fluid and flexible participation forms, which are addressed to subjects participating in multiple platforms and thus searching liquid relations, in which to pour their multiple needs, interests, and identities.

These can represent interesting starting points for cooperatives and could lead to striking changes. However - as shown by the research - the change cannot be pursued without a deep reflection on the meanings and the nature of cooperatives, and without an effort in maintaining the distinctiveness that this form of enterprise developed over the years, and which led it to become one of the most long lasting and resilient ones, even against the recent economic and financial crisis.

The objective is not to replace cooperation with a brand new model, but rather to learn from new tools how to strengthen the cooperative model itself. Among the cornerstones of the cooperative model that cannot be abandoned there are social responsibility and attention toward the impact on people, territories and communities and, as it has already been observed, democratic and open governance.

**Looking for concrete experiences**

The research (Unipolis Foundation, 2015) investigated on the existence of Italian cooperatives that have already adopted and hybridized elements taken from the collaborative economy. We decided not to look exclusively for cases of digital platforms constituted as cooperative enterprises (which are extremely rare even at an international level), but rather we...
tried to identify any existing cases of cooperatives that somehow integrated - or tried to integrate - at least one of the aforementioned elements of the collaborative economy (technological innovation, peer-to-peer models, new forms of governance and participation).

Even though concrete cases are very rare and still embryonic, there is a real interest in this topic and we are now witnessing the gradual development of first initiatives and projects of cooperatives which, more or less knowingly inspired by collaborative economy, share multiple aspects and some characteristics of this world.

First of all, we notice that the interest in the collaborative economy concerns especially some types of "younger" and "more dynamic" cooperatives, and is less frequently found among strongly established businesses operating in sectors that are rigidly ruled or are characterised by historically defined markets. We also observe that, at present, the collaborative economy is mainly a form of consumer economy, therefore - although all cooperatives could be in a way concerned - it is clear that some of them will be more involved. In particular, organisations with concrete incentives are: consumer and user cooperatives, services cooperatives, social cooperatives, and some specific sectors like cooperatives operating in transport, housing and cultural sectors.

Among emerging practices identified by the research, we will deal here with some cases, and we will refer to the Report in case further information is required (Unipolis Foundation, 2015).

**Consumer cooperatives**

In 2015, the collaborative economy was included for the first time among the trends analysed by Coop Italia in its annual report (COOP Italia, 2015). The report defines the practices of the collaborative economy as "pre-capitalist social relations which, thanks to the enabling potential of new technologies, are becoming a new way of producing and distributing" and focuses on their rapid development both in Italy and abroad. The report especially emphasises the interchangeability between production and consumption promoted by sharing economy (the subject of "prosumer") and the potentialities that this phenomenon opens up in terms of widespread micro-entrepreneurship. Moreover, it mentions some emerging practices in the food sector.

In terms of concrete examples, it has to be underlined that consumers cooperatives started to directly experiment the collaborative economy model only in a peculiar field, that of the fight against food waste. Since this is a very current topic (Expo 2015), some consumer cooperatives began to consider platforms as tools that can be used to coordinate citizens’ actions aimed at reducing the waste. In 2014 the Foundation "Il Cuore Si Scioglie" Onlus of Unicoop Florence launched the first fellowship on food waste reduction in cooperation with The Impact Hub Florence, and it supported the pre-acceleration phase of three selected projects suggesting the use of digital platforms to exchange, sell and donate unsold food products. Both the initiative and the product of such initiative are cooperative, as two of these projects are implemented by cooperatives.

The interest of consumer cooperatives in the collaborative model is not limited to the subject of waste, but it also takes a wider perspective on the evolution of physical shops as platforms where goods and services can be directly exchanged among members, thus fostering peer-to-peer dynamics and also entering into the very heart of typical activities and thus into the operating model of shops. Challenges are many, it is enough to think about the problem of certification for foods that are directly exchanged among individuals, but prospects and a general interest are not lacking.

**Inhabitants cooperatives**

Inhabitant cooperatives showed a strong interest in the model proposed by the collaborative economy. In fact, this offers important opportunities to create new sharing forms among inhabitants and to develop new collaborative services allowing people to share and the exchange resources, to save on utilities, to organise together social and proximity-based services, sustainable mobility, and much more. These new services can also be developed in synergy with other cooperatives, e.g. user cooperatives, social, cultural or transport cooperatives, thus taking advantage of opportunities that the cooperative system, on the whole, can offer.

Multiple innovative experiences have already been launched by inhabitants cooperatives, as shown by the project Eco Courts that mapped national and international best practices in terms of resources-saving and reduction of residents’ waste, by identifying multiple projects even among Italian inhabitants cooperatives. Cold or sparkling water as a common good, bike sharing, collective waste collection, common vegetable gardens, shared spaces for DIY: this is a non-exhaustive list of observed practices. The cooperative nature of neighbourhoods in which they emerge is not casual: as we can read in the 2015. The report defines the practices of the collaborative economy as "pre-capitalist social relations which, thanks to the enabling potential of new technologies, are becoming a new way of producing and distributing" and focuses on their rapid development both in Italy and abroad. The report especially emphasises the interchangeability between production and consumption promoted by sharing economy (the subject of "prosumer") and the potentialities that this phenomenon opens up in terms of widespread micro-entrepreneurship. Moreover, it mentions some emerging practices in the food sector.

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project report, “the attitude towards cooperation, at least at a theoretical level, has surely fostered the creativity of these groups of inhabitants [...]”

At the same time, sharing initiatives gave new energy to experiences of collective life that began decades ago, and which had partially lost their original impetus. Collaborative experiences proved to bring great advantages both for the environment and in terms of saving and life quality in “shared” living. At a technological level, we can observe that, even though many experiences are not of a technological nature, the introduction of digital tools could provide important opportunities to widen their impact. The potentialities of digital innovation can be seen not only in the increased coordination and efficiency of services, but also with regard to the development and the promotion of cooperation’s “social” dimension: technologies, in fact, can enhance new sharing and sociality forms among neighbours that juxtapose to economic and environmental impact also the strengthening of the socio-relational aspect, thus fully promoting the concept of cooperative living.

**Social cooperatives**

Social cooperation regards with great interest, but also with a certain amount of caution, at the collaborative economy. There are various factors to consider. Let’s take the example of type A social cooperatives, which provide social services to people. Peer-to-peer dynamics typical of the collaborative economy may be adjusted and used by these cooperatives in order to develop complementary forms of welfare and mutual help directly managed by people, in the form of peer-to-peer welfare services. Citizens could provide each other mutual support, for example in the field of elderly care or in the area of services to improve work-life balance, and they could activate support networks for specific issues such as welcoming and integrating immigrants. So, where does innovation lie as compared to traditional voluntary work within communities? The main difference concerns the use of digital online technologies, which allow to activate in a widespread and continued way potentially all community members, in order to provide or ask for help, thus increasing available resources and creating more social cohesion.

However, there are many problems emerging. First of all, it is fundamental to circumscribe precise limits within which these practices cannot take place: e.g., we cannot replace a qualified assistance service with a not qualified one provided by citizens, and the role of social protection played by the public authority towards those who have no access to platforms and support networks cannot be diminished. Moreover, we should not forget security and trust issues. On the other hand, it is precisely on matters such as trust and relationship that great potentialities can be observed, as the activation of a mutual support community, organised in a widespread way thanks to new technologies and characterised by proper relational devices, can enhance the trust and the cohesion of a whole community.

Generally speaking, concrete experiences of social cooperatives in the domain of collaborative economy are still lacking in Italy, and a certain caution prevails instead, especially on the part of those who work in very delicate sectors and services. At the same time, many start-ups constituted in the form of Ltd companies are beginning to offer services in sectors that were typical of social cooperatives (e.g. social services, conciliation services) through the development of peer-to-peer platforms, thus showing that there probably is a potential (or at least a need) in this sense.

An interesting case of convergence is represented by some social cooperatives that adopted the collaborative economy model to experiment brand new services which do not belong to their traditional fields of action: it is the case of Piacere Milano, a project promoted by two social cooperatives (La Cordata and Spazio Aperto Servizi), which launched a platform to make people living in Milan meet visitors of Expo 2015 and realise experiential tourism. The experience of Piacere Milano shows the dynamism and creativity of these social cooperatives, which saw in the collaborative economy a starting point to generate new services and new relational forms even beyond the borders of traditional social cooperation services.

A final cue of reflection concerns the possibility to use online technologies also as a tool to foster new mechanisms for better monitoring services and collecting feedback on the part of users, members and communities. Of course it would necessary to think about how collected feedbacks should be verified and used; however, opportunities seem interesting (to the last extent, co-production and the prosumer in social cooperatives).

**Collaborative economy: a viable option for cooperative movement?**

The debate on cooperatives and the collaborative economy, despite clear differences between the two worlds, leads to multiple cues of reflection with regards to opportunities of both models. On the one hand, it is possible that cooperatives adopt some tools and...
strong points from the collaborative economy, by adapting them to their fields of action and by developing new services and organisational models, new mutuality forms or new approaches of engagement and community creation, even based on the web and on new tools. At the same time, the collaborative economy can draw inspiration from cooperative experiences in order to reflect on fundamental aspects such as governance models, the relationship with physical communities and consideration of social impact.

The reflections suggested here are just the beginning of a debate that, in our opinion, should further develop and articulate in the future, if we want the collaborative economy to open virtuous paths of systemic innovation and renewal of current socio-economical models.

The service model proposed by collaborative platforms is currently living a moment of important contradictions. The rapid growth of large international platforms (especially in the domain of collaborative consumption) - and their financing - fed a debate that accuses large collaborative services of having lost their original social scope in order to repeat, in a new way, old models of capital accumulation. On the other hand, non-profit platforms and experiences aggregating citizens in associative forms struggle to sustain themselves and to develop because of the lack of resources and of an efficient and solid ecosystem, such as the one that enables the for-profit model. In the absence of resources and hindered by a series of barriers, classical third sector enterprises struggle to take advantage from new technologies and to adapt themselves to emerging economic and social forms.

Also cooperatives are experiencing a strong needs for reflection and renovation. As open cooperativism promoters observe, large cooperatives are beginning to look similar to corporations, both in market behaviour, organisational culture and in management style. The management and policies of these cooperatives are increasingly distant from their members' communities and, as time goes by, they are undermining the ability to enhance participation and create a shared cooperative culture (even because of transformations in the external context). Smaller cooperatives, on their part, cannot compete on the markets and keep the pace of innovation and new technologies. Generally speaking, the cooperative enterprise model, as emphasised by Conaty and Bollier (Conaty, Bollier, 2014) does no longer inspire the collective imaginary it originated in the past (in the years 1890, 1920 or 1970) and, despite remaining an economic sector of a great importance because of its turnover and its economic and social impact, it needs to be renovated in order to fully involve people and accomplish its economic, social, cultural and political functions.

For this reason, the origin of the collaborative economy and its rapid evolution should be taken in deep consideration in a wider debate on the Italian context.

Indeed, the cooperative system is today inevitably faced with the need to understand and interact with this model, which is so ideally close to its own DNA. Cooperatives need to interpret the collaborative economy and seize all opportunities, without necessarily copying it but rather adapting tools and concepts that may be useful to their mission. Only by understanding deeply the collaborative phenomenon and the origin of its success, cooperatives can understand the social demands and the generative potentials that this represents.

This challenge brings our thoughts back to the origins of social cooperation, in the 1970s. The emergence of that model came as the result of the significant democratic impulse that characterised those years, and laid its foundations on the increased participation and activation of citizens in response to the organisational limits of the welfare state (limits that were linked to the rationalisation of social assistance and to the emergence of the oil crisis). Exploring new opportunities and entrepreneurial models, the social cooperation movement gave birth to a new form of enterprise which proved capable to respond to the most pressing needs of the citizens, thus updating and realizing at the same time the needs and the potentialities of the whole cooperative model. The comparison with current times may provide us with some hints for reflection. In fact, as social cooperation in the 1970s was able to interpret new needs within the society and provide innovative answers, the current movement of the collaborative economy linked to new production, consumption and work forms is located in a wider context of socio-economic changes, and aims at creating new social and entrepreneurial practices that did not exist before.

We will conclude with some questions related to the future, which raise all the risks and challenges of path of cooperative innovation.

- How can cooperation interpret existing transformations and adapt the “collaborative” model to the “cooperative” one, by updating itself and providing innovative answers to the needs?
- Which role can a redefinition of the historical concept of “cooperative mutuality” play in this process? How can this concept be influenced by the new (social and technological) opportunities of the “peer-to-
peer collaboration” model? Is it possible (and, if so, under which conditions) that cooperatives re-interpret themselves even as “enabling platforms” fostering a direct collaboration among people? How to realize this without losing, but rather enhancing, its own specific features?

- How can cooperatives realize this convergence and transformation, paying attention to not acquire the negative aspects and the risks of the new collaborative forms, but ensuring instead to be different and alternative as compared to the model of the on-demand and platform capitalism models?
- How can they guarantee, even in this domain, the continuation of their role of social inclusion, avoid discriminations, originate new practices that are at the same time efficiently participated, inclusive and democratic?
- How can they develop innovations inspired by the collaborative economy that integrate the cooperative model without however replacing it, that is, how to avoid the aseptic transfer of platform models and guarantee a balanced development of the cooperative model on the whole?

Which role can cooperative startups play in testing and proving new collaborative models, and to what extent is it possible to promote instead a slow but “tailored” transformation of already existing and consolidated cooperative entities?

These challenges call into question the role of cooperative institutions and of the cooperative model on the whole, at a local, national and international level. It is necessary for organised cooperation and its managers to learn how to interpret current processes and rapid changes, in order to understand their dynamics, interpret emerging needs and suggest innovative solutions, in line with questions and demands aroused by people and communities. It is therefore fundamental to adopt new languages, able to reach and inspire the ever changing society and especially younger generations.

To conclude, it is necessary for the cooperative movement to work more and rapidly on two dimensions: technological innovation and social innovation.

References


