

# Women Cooperatives as Community Cooperatives in the Scope of the Multistakeholder Model of Governance: A Conceptual Approach

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## Abstract

The relationship between cooperatives and their communities has progressively gained on legitimacy across the years. It has, therefore, become essential to take community into consideration when studying cooperatives, especially from a governance perspective.

Effectively, women cooperatives in Morocco and in other countries continue to represent one of the major components of social economy and a dynamic motor for socio-economic growth of fragile groups within the community. However, despite their importance, they are still clearly lagging behind in comparison to cooperatives in Europe, for example; the question of governance is rarely tackled as a possible barrier to their growth and sustainability. Hence, this question of governance raises our interest as we look at women cooperatives as a specific type of coops which identity and mission slightly differs from other types of cooperative organizations. Accordingly, we shed the light on new models of governance, namely the multi-stakeholder model and we refer to social cooperatives in Italy which purpose is the integration of disadvantaged categories within the community, a mission that aligns with the core objective of women cooperatives.

In this paper, we argue that the exquisite nature of women cooperatives requires a specific model of governance. In our work, we introduce a conceptual framework where we highlight the link of women coops to their community as we attempt to define women coops as community coops<sup>1</sup> that strive for upgrading the socio-economic situation of women considered disadvantaged within their realities.

**Keywords:** Community cooperatives, Social cooperatives, Women cooperatives, Governance, Multi-stakeholder.

## Introduction

Women cooperatives represent one of the major components of social economy. They play an important role in the country's socio-economic development as they participate in jobs creation, the fight against poverty and exclusion, and the improvement of rural areas inhabitants' living conditions. Their particularity sits in the fact that they carry within them a communal mission as they strive for upgrading the socio-economic situation of disadvantaged women who do lack on skills that may make them eligible to access the labor force market.

Research on women cooperatives in Morocco for example is often focused on their environmental and economic attractiveness and performance[1][2][3]. However, there is almost no interest allocated to the problem of Moroccan women cooperatives' governance as a means of strengthening the latter's agency within the cooperative enterprise as well as the community. If we look at the history of female cooperatives initiative stated around the world, especially in developing countries, we will find that the rise of this form of cooperative organizations has been mainly a measure to reduce the social and economic disparities that qualify women in many countries as a disadvantaged group, particularly in rural areas. Many countries have understood that socio-economic development can never be achieved without the empowerment of

<sup>1</sup> Community cooperative: are cooperatives providing general-interest goods/services (Mori, 2014)

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vulnerable groups. In fact, the question of “why women cooperatives have been created?” must always be the landmark that guides all initiatives and policies related to organizations as specific as women cooperatives.

Research on women cooperatives identified, in addition to technical failures related to difficulties in supply, marketing and under-equipment, other weaknesses that hinder these entities’ growth and sustainability. The obstacles may be summed in the effect of social norms that restrain women’s role in the society into the household, organizational failure and illiteracy[4]. Hence, it becomes obvious that the issues that stimulated the formation of female cooperatives, in the scope of broad business models, continue to persist. In this case, questioning current practices becomes inevitable: How legitimate is it to treat women cooperatives like any other type of cooperative organization? What makes women cooperatives different than other types of cooperatives? Are traditional governance practices applicable to the special form of women cooperatives?

This question of governance raises our interest as we look at new models, namely the multi-stakeholder model that appeared in Italy in the last few decades of the 20th century and which depicted new standards tailored initially to match the particular genesis of social cooperatives, based namely on the involvement of various stakeholders in governance<sup>2</sup> (employees, consumers, donors, and other members of the community). In this perspective, we refer to social cooperatives in Italy, particularly, Type B, which purpose is the integration of disadvantaged categories within the community, a mission that aligns with the core objective of women cooperatives. To understand the similarity between women cooperatives and social cooperatives, in the aim of justifying the necessity to consider particular governance practices that apply best to these entities’ specificity, we shed the light on the concept of “Community cooperatives” anchored in the postulate that certain types of cooperatives maintain a special bond with their communities, and there, must be tackled differently.

Our work, hence, suggests a new frame of reference for women cooperatives that leverages their communal mission beyond the conventional restrictions limiting their core purpose to social justice. In our work, we introduce a conceptual framework where we highlight the exquisite link and relationship between the cooperative and its environment as we attempt to define women cooperatives as community cooperatives<sup>3</sup> that strive for upgrading the socio-economic situation of disadvantaged women who do not have enough skills that make them eligible to access the labor force market.

We, therefore, place our research in the framework of scientific works that suggest a new way of perceiving women cooperatives in Morocco while we investigate the aspects of stakeholders’ participation in cooperatives’ governance as a more sophisticated form of cooperation that if applied, may remediate to the different obstacles hindering women members’ agency within the cooperative and the community.

We begin this paper with an overview of what a cooperative organization is. We then outline the specificities of cooperative governance. In the next two sections, we discuss the specific case of social cooperatives in Italy and how the multi-stakeholder model seems to apply best to them. We then investigate the concept of “community cooperatives” starting by analyzing the special bond between cooperatives and community, towards a discussion of how can a community cooperative be identified. Finally, the last section outlines an analysis of women cooperatives based on Mori’s[5] criteria for defining a community cooperative, after discussing the complexity of discerning the concept of woman cooperative, causing an identity crisis, and later, confusion in defining their mission/objective.

## II. The Scope of the cooperative organization

The social economy is the set of economic activities that are characterized by the legal entrance and companies’ bylaws which include partnerships in contrast to joint stock companies. These are associations, cooperatives, mutuals and subtly include foundations as well. In an attempt to define social economy, Philip

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<sup>2</sup>World standards of social cooperatives, CICOPA 2004 ([www.cicopa.coop](http://www.cicopa.coop))

<sup>3</sup>Community cooperative: are cooperatives providing general-interest goods/services (Mori, 2014)

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Kotler says that social economy is a term invented by Muhammad Yunus to describe a company that makes money while impacting the society in which it operates[6].

The most important descriptive proposal was the Charter of the school of Social Economy directors promoted by the Permanent European Conference on cooperatives, mutuals, associations and foundations. It expresses the following:

- The primacy of the individual and social objective over capital;
- Voluntary and open membership;
- Democratic control by members;
- The combination of members' interests / users and / or the general interest;
- Defense and application of the principle of solidarity and responsibility;
- Self-management and independence from public authorities;
- The surplus is used to achieve the objectives of sustainable development.

A "cooperative" is a particular application of a very old concept: cooperation; the latter can be defined as a social process in which individuals gather to achieve a common goal. The term "cooperation" is not novice and it was present at all ages of mankind.

The cooperative is an economic organization defined as a social utopia and a practical experience in the late 19th century and was gradually specified in the law of some countries in the 20th century[7]. Its codification, varying across national contexts, refers to a set of values, principles and rules set out by the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA): a cooperative is "an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their aspirations and economic, social and cultural needs through a company which ownership is collective and where authority and control are practiced democratically"<sup>4</sup>. It is defined by principles of free and voluntary membership, autonomy, democratic administration (one member, one vote) and solidarity-inspired economic participation (members' participation in equity, indivisible and unremunerated equity).

### III. The concept of governance:

Although it shares many common features with the governance of traditional businesses, governance in social enterprises arises differently. From a stakeholders' perspective, the level of their participation and representation in governance structures differentiates cooperatives from other types of organizations. The importance of these social and environmental aspects stimulates a complex environment in which the influence of stakeholders plays a key role in governance and, thus, in the sustainability of cooperatives. Essential is the idea that organizations have responsibilities towards stakeholder groups and thus, implicitly towards social entities[8]. The logic of capitalist rationality focuses on meeting the interests of individuals and considers that game theory is the best mechanism to achieve collective prosperity[9]. In contrast, the social economy highlights a logical alternative centered on the common good and the collective ability to give shape to the economy.

The model put forward by [10]inspired by the stakeholder theory [11]contributes to the formulation of the ontological theory of stakeholders. This theory provides a broader perspective of stakeholder participation, which multitude is inherent to social economy enterprises and goes beyond restrictions related to equity inflows.

The term "governance", despite its existence for many years, has only become popular amongst research and practice in the past 40 years. If we look at the available definitions of the word governance, would find that there is a sense a broadness within it: In fact, Governance is generally concerned with governing the different stakes within the organization as well as the relationship between the board and management and how the first entity exercises proper control over the second one, how are policies set and what mechanisms are established to drive all concerned parties to apply and respect them.

Cooperatives, like other forms of social and solidarity economy enterprises tend to adopt a specific form of governance. In fact, several questions have been posed as to why these entities prefer to maintain a horizontal form of organization and install informal networks of relationships rather than formal forms of hierarchical structure[12].

The literature on cooperatives' governance has shown that the latter forms of social and solidarity economy enterprises tend to deal with their managers differently than corporate enterprises and that the

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<sup>4</sup>International Cooperative Alliance (ICA), 2013 ([www.ica.coop](http://www.ica.coop))

relationships between the members, managers and the board of directors is established generally grounded in cooperative values and principles and is based on informal, implicit contracts instead of high-powered incentives to their managers [13]. Empirically, the legislation governing cooperatives differ from a country to another, of course, taking into consideration the specificity of contextual factors. In some countries like Morocco, for example, cooperative law 12-112 applies to all coops regardless of type or sector of activity. In Italy, on the other hand, the legislator has considered certain specificities of certain cooperative types and has, thus, established specific laws for certain types of cooperatives and has addressed their governance differently seeing their exquisite nature (Law 381/91 on social cooperatives). This leads us to question how efficient are broad policies in countries such as Morocco, especially those addressing governance practices, supposed to apply to all types of cooperatives regardless of their mission/vocation, regardless of their reason of existence.

### IV. The case of social cooperatives in Italy

For some coops, traditional governance is no longer effective. The Italian law on social cooperatives was the first to recognize that in a cooperative, the aim, mission or vocation of the latter alters the way it needs to be approached. Social cooperatives have been initiated to benefit the whole community rather than serving the sole interest of its members<sup>5</sup>. The adoption of this Italian bill made of Italy one of the most solid models and references on community service and public benefit in the world. This being said, the Italian legislation still maintains as a building block of its cooperative law that every cooperative is entitled to serve the interest of its members.

According to the law 381/91 on social cooperatives: "Social cooperatives are intended to pursue the general interest of the community, the human promotion and social integration of citizens through:

- A) The management of social, health and educational services;
- B) Carrying out various activities - agricultural, industrial, commercial or service - aimed at providing employment for disadvantaged persons." Legge 381/91 – Articolo1.

The latter mentioned points correspond to the two types of social cooperatives defined by the law:

Type A: Operates for the provision of social, educational and cultural services;

Type B: Carries out various activities while bringing together permanent workers and disadvantaged unemployed people who wish to integrate the labor market.

In the case of social cooperatives, serving the specific interest of members synchronically with the public interest of community members makes them an exquisite case of complementary missions and purposes. In this case, social cooperatives work differently than the rest of coops. They strive to provide welfare in a direct manner to its members, yet, under this same lens, the nature of these services is seen to promote social justice while touching the society at large by having both direct and indirect effects on the rest of community members.

#### I. Multi-Stakeholdership: A specific model of governance for a specific type of coop

The Multi-stakeholder governance model sets a governance structure that aims to involve stakeholders by encouraging them to participate in dialogue, decision-making and the implementation of solutions to problems and the achievement of common goals[14].

In Italy, the United States and Canada, the emphasis of the roles and functions of stakeholders and actors affecting the cooperative led to an enhanced form of the cooperative sector upgrade. It represented an example of growth since its adoption fifteen years ago. The multi-stakeholder model was inspired by the Italian cooperative model which emerged from the Emilia Romagna region in 1991. It was implemented later following the enactment of a law that organized cooperatives activity and ensured the inclusion of employees, consumers, donors, and members of the community.

In the United States and Canada, this model was adopted to fight the repercussions of the economic crisis. For example, the case of "Oklahoma Food Cooperative"<sup>6</sup>, a cooperative located in the state of Oklahoma in the US, illustrates how the adoption of this model connects local food farmers and consumers who represent the Oklahoma community to create a system of production and local food consumption. Both categories of stakeholders participate in the elections of members of the Board of Directors and transact in accordance to the cooperatives' central project: "There is a larger collective need that goes beyond one

<sup>5</sup> Legge 381/91 sulle cooperative sociali: Chap 1, statute No. 381, 1991

<sup>6</sup> www.oklahomafood.coop

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Particular interest"[15]. What is obvious is that in general, despite the considerable breach of information, support and interest in this approach, the number of multi-stakeholder cooperatives continues to grow[16].

According to[17], the multi-stakeholder cooperative is the logical translation of the seventh cooperative principle (concern for the community) defined by the "ICA". In more and more countries, multi-stakeholdership is institutionalized in the social enterprise laws and regulations, based on the cooperative model in which there is cooperation between workers, consumers, public authorities, and other stakeholders.

The global standards of social cooperatives<sup>7</sup> established in 2011 by CICOPA<sup>8</sup> clearly outline governance as a specific characteristic of multi-stakeholder cooperatives due to their exquisite way in which they are anchored in the community. The multi-stakeholder cooperatives are characterized by being open to more than one class of members and increased sensitivity to community needs. In fact, multi-stakeholder cooperatives are defined as community coops as the social<sup>9</sup> perspective is naturally aligned with their structure and objectives as they exist to serve a part of society.

While cooperatives generally focus on the needs of a single type of members, multi-stakeholder cooperatives focus on the issues that affect the wider community and are addressed through the involvement of different types of actors[18].

### II. The cooperative-community relationship: A particular bond

If we refer to the seven cooperation principles<sup>9</sup> established by the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA), we will find "concern for community", which represents the 7th principle and frames the necessity that the cooperative organization works for the sustainable development of its community. In other words, it implicitly incorporates the concern and the role of the cooperative in its community's economic, social and cultural development. Further, the ICA has also identified the core values that all cooperative organizations must share, apply, believe in and transmit throughout its structural bodies to fit into the global philosophy of cooperation. These values are: self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, solidarity, honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others.

It is, thus, clear that an important part of the cooperative identity integrates within it the urge for cooperatives to create and maintain a close bond with their entourage through social responsibility, community service and development. The questions that come to mind, therefore, are as follows: How do cooperatives relate to their community? How is the bond created and what is the role of the cooperative in community development?

Cooperative are organizations that are required to submerge within today's economy in order to be able to survive, and consequently, will need to perform according to the rules and guidelines that regular businesses are ought to comply with. The professionalization of cooperative organizations has been not only a true challenge but also an important requirement to be able to align with the current pace of competitiveness. Therefore, these entities are forced to evolve in a way that does not differ from that of other forms of enterprises specifically in terms of their complex organizational structure, their technological slot, their management processes, activity and even their relation to the environment. However, this total iteration of the cooperative organization may cause a dilution of the essence and the cause of existence of this organizational form. Mirroring the capitalist form of organizations will therefore oppose the formerly mentioned cooperative principles and values and such sharp focus on economic management creates a certain dichotomy that opposes business and social and stipulates that in order to be competitive in the market, cooperatives must be less "cooperative". In this perspective, cooperatives must deny their basic characteristics and the relationship linking them to the community must be placed apart.

Community development is a dynamic process that engages people from a certain community through actions that are not owned by an owner but by every member of that community[19]. If we look closely at this statement, we can figure that it resembles the main characteristic of a cooperative organization, which consists of collective ownership of an organization where access is open to all and where common goods are built based on democratic and participatory management processes. [20]advances that actors in the community can build a common good if they work together in a community action where they provide a true sense of social responsibility as well as their physical, mental and material contributions. It is such philosophy of collective action that can promote values such as solidarity and upgrade the sense of

<sup>7</sup> The global standards of social cooperative ([http://www.cicopa.coop/cicopa\\_old/IMG/pdf/world\\_standards\\_of\\_social\\_cooperatives\\_en-4.pdf](http://www.cicopa.coop/cicopa_old/IMG/pdf/world_standards_of_social_cooperatives_en-4.pdf))

<sup>8</sup> CICOPA or International Organization of Industrial and Service Cooperatives, A Sector of the International Cooperative Alliance

<sup>9</sup> The International Cooperative Alliance has established seven principles that are used by all cooperative organizations as guidelines to put cooperative values into practice. We refer the reader to the ICA's platform to learn about these principles: <https://ica.coop/en/whats-co-op/co-operative-identity-values-principles>

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citizenship amongst community members as they become empowered to participate in the management of public policies. Citizens will therefore become real actors in the development process. It is then by empowering community members and strengthening their participation scopes and abilities that we act on promoting development.

As we project these advances on the cooperative conjuncture, based on the fact that cooperatives are built upon collective action, we may infer that by promoting socio-economic welfare and upgrading members' quality of life through mechanisms of participation and democracy, cooperative organizations adopt a posture of development.

### III. The rise of community cooperatives:

Since the cooperative movement started emerging in the 18th century, it was built upon one philosophy based on the formation of groups of people/members that enjoy similar social or professional criteria and who come together to serve their mutual/common interests. The Rochdale Society's principles, which represent the founding bylaws of the movement, explicitly underlined this feature of cooperatives: 'The objects and plans of this Society are to form arrangements for the pecuniary benefit and the improvement of the social and domestic condition of its members'<sup>10</sup>. Accordingly, worker cooperatives, producer cooperatives and even agricultural and housing ones were established and evolved according to such philosophy.

The formation of cooperatives was triggered by the aspiration to upgrade the social and economic wellbeing of the working poor. The founding fathers of the movement (such as Robert Owen, 1771-1858; William King, 1786-1865; the Rochdale Pioneers, 1844) agreed on the role of such new organizational form as a way to help socially and economically relieve the disadvantaged people thanks to the establishment of social capital and catering members' interests. The development of this movement has always been, therefore, centered around labor and characterized by a unity of individuals from homogeneous social backgrounds.

In fact, it is worth mentioning that according to authors on the history of cooperatives [21][5], the aim of early cooperatives was to serve the interests of their members, according to the traditional cooperative model, yet serving the public interest emerged implicitly and unintentionally. This idea was undertaken by economists from the classical school from an economic perspective who stated that the access of cooperatives to the market stimulates competition.[22]and [23]for example studied cooperatives from a rather socio-economic perspective by advancing that the expansion of cooperatives helped achieve social justice in a way that allows disadvantaged people (referred to as workers who neither own capital nor land) to have access to capital and thus upgrade their socio-economic status from simple workers to capitalists or landowners. Accordingly, the latter viewed cooperatives as a means to empowering the poor and marginalized categories of the society by granting them the capacity to participate in wealth distribution through capital ownership. Hence, the cooperative's role is not only bound to the traditional purpose of serving its own members' interests, but it also incorporates a social aspect related to their socio-economic progress, and even more, to the overcome of socio-economic injustice and unequal wealth distribution. In other words, the indirect inclination of a cooperative to serving common social interests beyond those of its members comes only if it seeks the enhancement of disadvantaged categories' situation.

It is on the end of the 19th century that a new form of community cooperatives evolved, explicitly attributing to its mission and reason of being the enhancement and upgrade of the whole society's or community's wellbeing. Their purpose was to provide essential services of public usage, serving the needs and interests of all members of the society/community. It is, thus, in such manure that new organizational forms came along the process namely in terms of the type and nature of the goods and services produced, the organizational structure and the social group or community of reference. The first community cooperatives in this category emerged with the bloom of electrification. The first electric cooperative was started in Italy<sup>11</sup>and provided services of general interests (i.e. water and electricity) to all the members of the community. In fact, what was interesting about these electrical cooperatives was their organizational form. They were formed of members who have certainly worked to serve their own interests but also embraced open membership and allowed non-member patronage. These entities participated in providing welfare for the whole members of the community, not by the social upgrading of the disadvantaged but by providing a service of general interest to all members of the community.

<sup>10</sup>The Rochdale Pioneers Rule book , 1844

<sup>11</sup>*Societacooperativa per l'illuminazioneelettrica* founded at Chiavenna, Italy, in 1894

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This original picture started to alter gradually following important historical events namely the Oil crisis that took place in 1973 causing the shock of several economies through inflation and high rates of unemployment and poverty. As a consequence to the incapacity of the state to solve these problems, it is the people who took the initiative, in a solidarity-based framework, to come together and guarantee the minimum welfare to their fellow community members. Accordingly, these events marked the beginning of the rise of what is known as “community cooperatives”<sup>12</sup>. As a result, existing boundaries between social classes started to become blurry and concern about the fragile layers of the community increased.

### V. Defining community cooperatives:

In an attempt to define “community cooperatives” without a specific classification like what exists in research and in practice [5] worked on the provision of a fine definition of this category of cooperatives that removes any confusion and helps to easily identify organizations that fall into this category. We base our research on the definition provided by [5]. The latter referred to several disciplines to identify how “community institutions” in general are defined. For example, the literature on “community institutions” both in sociology and in Management identified this category as not-for-profit organizations while other definitions are about to the business field in which the organization operates, such as energy for example [24]. Accordingly, [5] adopted as a starting point, the definition provided by [25]: “People in the local community . . . become members of the cooperative and buy shares to finance the project” [25].

But what exactly is a community and what are the delimiting points of the concept? To discern this concept, Mori referred to the expression of “community cooperative” itself and underlined the fact that every cooperative is actually linked to a community, be it a farmer cooperative (farmers in this case), worker cooperatives (workers in this one), hence why, he places as a first criteria to define a community cooperative to restricting our thinking to a physical community at first. It is from here that rises the territorial delimitation based on the specificity of these organization: providing goods which are of interest to the whole community” which means, members or non-members. In other words, the provision of the product or service directly impacts the social and economic development of the local area. An important element highlighted by Mori was the scope of the good or service’s usage. According to him, the fact of being resident to the territory does justify the use of a “community product or service” provided by the community cooperatives. This implies that as a resident, the service would still be of interest to me, yet I may not use it immediately, buy may use it in the future.

“Citizenship” is the second criteria. Under this criterion, the use and interest in the good/service is overpassed to the affiliation or pertinence to a specific local territory. In this case, the formation of the cooperative is not bound to a professional or a social group, rather, any citizen belonging to the community has the ability to join it.

In the third place, the third criterion is said to be quite restrictive in defining a community cooperative. It is the open and non-discriminatory access to community members. This criterion aligns with the ICA’s principle of “open-membership”. Under this factor, the interest in the service or product is not bound of whether it is used actually or immediately, rather, it is the fact that the citizens of the community represent potential users of it in the future and especially not denied access to it under any condition.

The Italian law on social cooperative, for example, to distinguish between organizations that fall under community cooperatives, requires conscious and explicit highlight of the public benefit the cooperative provides and insists on the fact that for a community cooperative, working on the execution of this public benefit, thus social justice, must be also included in its aim and identity.

### VI. Women cooperatives: an identity crisis?

Participation in cooperatives or other forms of collective activity has dramatically improved and changed perceptions about women’s roles and capabilities as active members of the society. Women’s membership in a collective action can strengthen their social capital, access to resources and improve their management and leadership skills<sup>13</sup>. In the quest of finding a clear and proper definition of women cooperatives, we find ourselves facing a very large scope of advances on what a female cooperative is, each being framed according to a contextual standpoint. For example, in rural Nigeria and rural India, women cooperatives are viewed as a group of female members who engage in collective activities for the purpose of achieving an economic wellbeing for them and their families [26][27]. In Uganda, women cooperatives are seen as a mean

<sup>12</sup> Mori (2014) defined community cooperatives as “cooperatives which essentially provide services of general interest to a whole community”.

<sup>13</sup> Bureau of Applied Research in Anthropology, 2013.

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to changing the daily lives of its members and the wider community<sup>14</sup>. In Morocco, the National Office of Development and Cooperation (ODCO) identifies women cooperatives as:

“Cooperatives created exclusively by women with the aim of improving their living conditions by allowing them to benefit from their right to adequate income and giving them the power to make decision, which will have an effect on their family life as well as the education of their children<sup>15</sup>.” ODCO, Morocco.

This multitude in defining women cooperatives draws on the complexity of discerning this concept often causing a random implementation of practices and sometimes even policies, yet, what is clear is that by looking at all these advances in identifying a female cooperative, the extent to the community is an integral part of their identity become undeniable.

### VII. Are women cooperatives a form of community cooperatives?

To answer this question, we shall look deeper into the social, economic and cultural antecedents of women cooperatives.

Research on female cooperatives in particular, in addition to technical failures related to supply, marketing and underdevelopment difficulties [28] also reveals other weaknesses such as:

- The time factor and the traditional reductive perception of the role of women in society (e.g. looking after their home and their family);
- Illiteracy, lack of training, education and support that lead to a lack of self-confidence among women members.

Due in particular to traditions and culture, the experience of discrimination of women in most countries - especially those of the Third World - in almost all spheres of society (education, politics ... etc.) has a direct impact on their living conditions, which hinder their integration into socio-economic development as responsible persons.

In such a highly patriarchal social structure - undoubtedly not the sole in the world yet probably one in which social stigma and stereotypes are more pronounced - gender is a socially constructed phenomenon and is represented by men and women who are brought together within the institutional framework of marriage where women's role is perceived to be within the context of the home [29] and where the role of men is bound of financial support, bread winning and decision making outside the home [30].

In Morocco, for instance, women are attributed the job of taking care of their house and family as a priority role. Women are held responsible for the wellbeing of the family and household care regardless of their responsibilities outside the latter. Women's roles are stigmatized through the perception that they are only designed to stick to household tasks and responsibilities dramatically influence women's use of time and participation in the labor force<sup>16</sup>.

Additionally, inactivity seems to be generally related to little or no education while educated women are more likely to actively take part of the labor force<sup>17</sup>. Yet, even educated women face lower participation rates in comparison to their male counterparts. Accordingly, education is an important factor related to women's access to employment both in rural and urban areas.

Substantially, marriage and mobility also represent key factors that explain women's activity outside the household. Married women are less likely to participate in the labor force due to several reasons including stigma and social norms and the number of children within the household. Restricted mobility is imposed on women due to cultural norms and tightens the scope of their access to employment outside the community. In fact, in some areas, a woman may be granted permission to move only in the case of the presence of an extended member of the family in the destination<sup>18</sup>.

All these factors collectively hinder women's agency which has a crucial role in establishing a solid ground for their socio-economic emancipation that can only be achieved through their inclusion in the labor force.

We may, thus, infer that the liberation of women by empowering them through their integration in entrepreneurial initiatives represents not only an answer to their social and cultural oppression; furthermore, it even stimulates a direct projection on the socio-economic growth of their community.

<sup>14</sup> <http://healthmarketinnovations.org/program/uganda-private-midwives-organization-upmo>

<sup>15</sup> “Ce sont des coopératives créées exclusivement entre femmes ayant comme objectif d'améliorer leurs conditions de vie en les faisant bénéficier du droit à un revenu suffisant et d'un pouvoir de prise de décision, ce qui aura des répercussions sur leur vie de famille et l'éducation de leurs enfants.” [www.odco.gov.ma](http://www.odco.gov.ma)

<sup>16</sup> World Development Report, 2012

<sup>17</sup> Labor Force Survey (LFS), 2011

<sup>18</sup> World Bank Report, 2015



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According to [31] what characterizes female cooperative is the fact that its members work collectively to solve a common problem while taking advantage of the opportunities offered by the market. Because of their social and local roots, cooperatives are more sensitive to the needs of their members and their community.

Applying the cooperative model to women allows them to partner to start a business that will meet their needs. This phenomenon, which is perfectly visible in rural areas where living conditions are more discriminating, has enabled women to find some place as active actors at the economic and social level.

[32] assert that women cooperatives in emerging countries contribute to the promotion of their territories of reference by confectioning and supplying goods and services across valuing local products and preserving local cultural heritage. In Morocco, the identity of women cooperatives is strongly connected to the good or service they provide. These are permanently connected to a traditional know-how, a heritage related to some skills they have learned from their mothers or grandmothers. Hence, the produce or output made and supplied by these women incorporates effectively a piece of the territory they belong to and represent through their cooperatives.

While projecting on the analytical developments of [5] in his quest of defining a “Community cooperative”, we can observe that:

At the level of the organization: the cooperative is formed of a group of women from a certain special territory (region, county, city, country) that come together to create value for themselves, for their region and for their country. Territorial inking in this case is realized through the anchorage of the cooperative, their members and their supplied output in the same territory.

At the product level: The stake here is double edged in a sense that a reflection on the identity of the cooperative itself is required. The question here is: Is the female cooperative defined by the activity (product/service) it provides or by its reason why it was started and exists? In fact, nowadays, and in the quest of increasing the professionalization of women cooperatives, we observe that the different actors in the field of cooperative development apply a sharp focus on the economic and managerial factors implied in female cooperatives. [4] advanced that scientifically speaking the majority of the research available on women cooperatives is related to their operational, managerial or environmental aspects. In this perspective, female cooperatives are rather perceived and defined based on their economic activity (e.g. an Argan coop is identified as an Argan producing enterprise). Herein, a more important element in identifying women cooperatives is omitted: it is the reason behind their existence “the inclusion of marginalized and under-privileged women in the labor market and the upgrade of their socio-economic development”. Accordingly, the whole perception of what a women cooperative is must be altered towards a rather two-edged definition:

-A definition by the product/service or activity

- A definition by the mission

It is, in fact, this second element of a woman cooperative’s identity that may justify Mori’s position on the use of the cooperative’s product or service. According to [5], a community cooperative must provide a product or a service that is used by all members of the community or, in another case, the latter represent potential users in the future. In this sense, the product or service provided by the female cooperative is a product that incorporates a whole heritage / heritage, has a meaning and value for all con-citizens (Ex: Argan, carpets, Henna, Almonds, roses ... etc) and is used or may be used in the future by all the members of the community since it is part of their own identity, tradition and heritage [33]. Secondly, another service that all female cooperatives provide to their community member is the cooperative platform itself which is open to all the females of the community who may join it immediately or may consider doing so in the future. It is indeed the mission of the female cooperative that is built upon the provision of a social “service” which is the opportunity to provide work for the females of the community. This aspect also justifies the second condition provided by [5] in regards to identifying a community cooperative, related to “Open access/membership”. In fact, the existence of the cooperative provides a service for all women in the region. It creates employment opportunities and facilitates socio-economic integration in the labor market (Those who use this service or still don’t use it but will be able to do it in the future [5]).

At the level of the individual (The woman): The third criterion of “citizenship” stated by [5] is verified. Women members are citizens residing in a common territory and their involvement in the female cooperative represents a kind of ratification of their citizenship. The learning and practice of the cooperative action can guarantee a reconstruction of a democratic culture not only within the cooperative but also at the level of the community. Ensuring that decisions made reflect and respond to local concerns should strengthen democracy by making democratic processes more responsive. Stimulation of sensitivity towards collective deliberation and interests will guarantee the territorial and political reintegration of women as

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active citizens who will be aware of their role and their contributions, which they will be able to adapt to the changing context in which the cooperative operates[34].

Accordingly, and based on all of the above, women cooperatives enjoy the three conditions that [5]traced to identify a community cooperative. In this perspective, the comparison of women cooperatives that practice governance traditionally and Italian social cooperatives who enjoy more advance governance practices is justified under the category of community cooperatives.

### VIII. Conclusion

Women cooperatives are influenced by certain specificities that call for specific models of governance which need to move away from the dominant traditional model often adopted by the majority of cooperatives. In female cooperatives, the salient anchorage in the territory that is often the reason behind the will of a group of women to start a cooperative, the output generated from a knowhow strongly marked in the members' being and the asserted citizenship principle through membership can only suggest the necessity to perceive a women cooperative differently and the importance to always use as a reference the reason this type of cooperatives was created in the first place. This new perspective gives governance another role consisting of creating a partnership, network based dynamic between the cooperative and its environment as the most efficient way to ensure sustainability of the cooperative.

At this point, our focus should be directed to how multi-stakeholder governance in cooperatives is established empirically. In fact, though small in amount, empirical evidence exists on multi-stakeholder cooperatives. Studies bridging cooperatives governance and stakeholder participation insist on the fact that multi-stakeholder processes may re-enforce democracy by increasing effective participation possibilities of persons who are directly affected by decisions and by ensuring that the decisions made reflect and align with local concerns [35]. On the other hand, the literature on multiple stakeholder cooperatives as a form of member heterogeneity presents mixed effects regarding the multi-stakeholder governance. In the Italian context, [35]admits that the struggles experienced by Italian social cooperatives cannot be attributed to their governance structures. He explains that different stakeholder groups are in fact able to maintain a focus on the overall mission and goals of these organizations; for instance, volunteer members typically contribute their time to these social cooperatives for altruistic reasons rather than to pursue individual interests. Similarly, investors are commonly donors committed to the social outcomes of these cooperatives and are not focused on financial returns. Other respondents felt that having funders involved in decision-making led to stronger ties and effective communication. Additionally, other researchers argue that the representation of divergent stakeholder groups allowed organizations to take advantage of different skill sets and fulfill both their social and economic missions [36]. Others inferred that multi-stakeholder processes may re-enforce democracy by increasing effective participation possibilities of persons who are directly affected by decisions and by ensuring that the decisions made reflect and align with the cooperative's main objectives[37].

Hence, the question of governance in the setting of women cooperatives raises our interest as we question the traditional model of governance, based on mutuality and restricted to serving cooperative members' interests only, and whether the broader forms of governance, based on extended participation, could apply to these entities more efficiently.

Through further research, we aim to address the entailments of stakeholder participation in the cooperatives' governance by identifying the factors that intervene in the success of social cooperatives in implementing good governance practices, and how such practices may serve as a model for Moroccan women cooperatives, taking into account, eventually, the particularities of the Moroccan context.

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