



INTERNATIONAL
CENTRE FOR
CO-OPERATIVE
MANAGEMENT

COMPLEX NETWORKS

FOR COOPERATIVE ECONOMIES

Report

Complex Networks for Sustainable Economies is the outcome of a partnership to assess the robustness of BC's co-operative network. The International Centre for Co-operative Management at Saint Mary's University led the research in cooperation with the British Columbia Co-operative Association (BCCA). The report is structured into three main sections: a conceptual framework about complex co-operative networks, British Columbia's case study, and two samples of consolidated co-operative economies worldwide. This comprehensive study provides a reference framework regarding the nature and dynamics of complex networks among co-operatives and partners with shared values.



The British Columbia Cooperative Association (BCCA) is a second-tier community service co-operative, an association among cooperatives across multiple industries, supporting and promoting the province's co-op sector. The association is a hub for co-operative development and networking, fostering a regional co-operative economy.



The International Centre for Co-operative Management (ICCM) is a research and education centre at Saint Mary's University in Halifax, Canada. The ICCM's primary purpose is to support the growth and sustainability of cooperative enterprises through research, education, and knowledge exchange, generating data that can inform the development and improvement of co-operative enterprises worldwide. It serves as a hub for interdisciplinary research on co-operatives, offering educational programs and training to individuals interested in co-operative management.

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Executive Summary

Some regions have broken new ground for an alternative economic approach based on complex cooperative networks. Regional networks have embraced an unorthodox relationship between people and organizations across the private, public, nonprofit and financial sectors based on cooperation, mutuality and solidarity. This report provides a structure or a conceptual map for understanding the vital elements of context-dependent cooperative networks, including their purpose, agents, respective functions, context variables and how those elements interact to bolster cooperative formation and sustainability. This report also provides a case study for understanding the cooperative development in British Columbia and variations in different regions such as Quebec in Canada and Emilia Romagna in Italy.

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As provincial cooperatives in British Columbia, Canada, partner with each other and reach for support from non-cooperative peers to consolidate a network of mutual support in the region, they sought an analytical instrument designed for evaluating how complex cooperatives unfold and help identify certain deficiencies. Based on the literature and existing cases worldwide, this report has gathered the building blocks for complex cooperative networks, articulating a conceptual framework to inform policies and help developers build tailored strategies for cooperative development and sustainability.

Given that complex networks often originate from and are deeply embedded within specific territories, reflecting their unique contextual nuances, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to their creation and maintenance. Still, we can identify a few core elements that help understand the network dynamics, including the way networks are structured or their means of organization (WHAT), the purposes behind inter-cooperation (WHY), the type of agents driving or collaborating to this process (WHO), and their functions, meaning the way they effectively contribute to the network (HOW), the contextual variables and the broad outcomes of networking beyond immediate goals.

Once the groundwork for evaluation is laid, the report examines a snapshot of British Columbia's inter-cooperation dynamics, focusing on the emerging Alliance for Cooperative Development. Rather than concentrating on specific sectorial networks, the case study introduces the relationships and connections that have contributed to a broader inter-cooperation vision for the province. Key findings suggest that BC hosts most of the building blocks of a complex network, primarily at an emerging level. Active multi-stakeholder programs and partnerships focused on infrastructure, capacity building, community outreach, and education have sustained critical connections in the region. However, the network's untapped potential lies in the scarcity of development capital, a disconnected financial ecosystem, inadequate public sector engagement, and lack of diversity among institutional actors ahead of network coordination, which has overburdened a few dedicated organizations.

Potential solutions to current challenges may be inspired by examining other mature ecosystems where cooperative networks have flourished. Therefore, this report includes two brief case studies covering the cooperative economy of Emilia Romagna in Italy and the social solidarity economy of Quebec in Canada, following the same conceptual framework applied to British Columbia.

Emilia Romagna is known as the homeland of Italian cooperation, with networks dating back to the nineteenth century. One of the densest cooperative economies worldwide, with the sector accounting for a third of the region's GDP, reached its prominence through a vast interwoven fabric of mutual support and a well-established network of networks. There, small and medium-sized cooperatives operate independently or engage in local, flexible manufacturing networks. These cooperatives are often integrated into the membership of consolidated second-tier cooperatives that, at a national level, form the Alliance of Italian Cooperatives.

Embracing a completely different approach, Quebec has gained recognition as a laboratory of social innovation. There, cooperatives operate under the provincial framework of social solidarity, benefiting from congruent policies and the broad availability of development capital from solidarity finance networks. By networking under consolidated sectoral umbrella organizations and strengthening relationships with other non-cooperative partners, cooperatives Québécoises have bolstered their presence in the region.

What British Columbia, Emilia Romagna, and Quebec share is a deliberate effort to bring together resources and connections, aimed at cultivating a cooperative ecosystem that is environmentally, socially, and economically sustainable. Identifying core networking elements across different levels of system maturity yields valuable insights into the creation and preservation of autonomous, self-reliant, and resilient cooperatives in a territory.