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## COOPERATIVES' VALUES IN POLAND AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Barbara Mazur  
Krystyna Zimnoch

### ABSTRACT

**Purpose** – The research question this work answers is whether the values declared by Polish cooperatives are parallel to the sustainable development paradigm. In order to answer this question, the following research objectives were set: to provide comprehensive information on the topic of sustainable development and cooperatives values, to identify the values communicated by Polish cooperatives on their websites, and to critically analyse whether those values are consistent with sustainable development values.

**Methodology** – The three main research methods used in the course of this research are: literature review, website content analysis, and a comparative study.

**Findings** – The results of the research indicate that cooperatives are businesses meeting the needs of local communities and implementing actions in favour of social responsibility. Thus, they fulfil the principles of sustainable development on the level of the region which they operate in.

**Social implications** – The research should have an impact on society by showing that values adopted by cooperatives are very strongly associated with values related to local communities. This means that they guarantee regional development.

**Originality / value** – Analysis of the content of webpages in search of the values declared by cooperatives has an innovative character. The value of this analysis is all the greater considering the fact that cooperatives are very numerous represented in the study.

**Keywords:** cooperatives, values, sustainable development, Poland

### INTRODUCTION

As a response to the growing awareness of the importance of market communication, there is an increased incentive amongst organizations to communicate various aspects of their activities. The Internet gives an organization the opportunity to demonstrate information such as mission and vision or reports on sustainability online. It is self-presentation which embraces, among other things, the set of values the organization adheres to. The main goal of this article is to indicate how Polish cooperatives are contributing to achieving goals of sustainable development by analysing their declarations online.

The aims of the research are to identify the values declared by cooperatives on their websites and to discover if they support the sustainable development paradigm. The article attempts to show that cooperatives can be considered as a proven way to the objective of sustainable development.

Research on cooperatives in Poland is scarce as significantly more research has been conducted among profit-oriented businesses (corporations) in relation to usability-oriented organizations, like cooperatives.

The article begins with a short presentation of the concept of cooperatives and their main values. Secondly, the fundamental values of sustainable development are introduced. Then, the authors examine the webpages of Polish cooperatives looking for information on

sustainability-related values. The information is presented according to the following scheme: what the cooperatives do, for whom and in what manner. In the final part, the implementation of the goals of sustainable development of the cooperatives is presented.

### **Cooperatives' Values**

Cooperatives are associations of people who combine their capital to create businesses. They manage them democratically and meet the goals of the members. A cooperative, as an organization, has its own culture founded on internationally accepted principles of cooperative organization that emphasize member ownership and control, servicing members' and thereby community needs, and collective norms (Stoll, Poon, Hamilton, 2015). Therefore, its source lies in the cooperative values stored in the cooperative principles. These values were developed by the Rochdale Pioneers in 1844, who created the first successfully operating cooperative – The Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers. Their rules were adopted by the cooperative movement throughout the world. Since the beginning of the movement, cooperators have set themselves realistic goals: simple actions to meet basic needs. The Rochdale Pioneers wanted to buy basic, good quality food products at a fair price; they did not want to be cheated on weight and did not want low quality goods. They set up their own store and chose their own suppliers. In response to a usurious percent, people started to create credit unions. After the First and Second World Wars, war-disabled people, wanting to live suitably, created their own cooperatives. So, members' needs and values have always defined cooperative actions. This also applies to cooperatives established and functioning nowadays. Thus, in a cooperative, people are joined together in a collective action aiming to meet their needs. This action is determined by the values of cooperators. They choose a cooperative as an activity form, convinced about the possibility of preserving their values and acting in accordance with them (Abramowski, 2012). The following is guaranteed by cooperative principles:

- voluntary and open membership;
- democratic member control;
- economic participation of members;
- autonomy and independence;
- education, training and information;
- inter-cooperative collaboration;
- care for the local community. (*International Co-operative Alliance*)

The guarantee of cooperative democracy, autonomy and independence encourages economic participation and therefore the inclusion of one's private resources. This is not, however, investing assets to maximize profits, which characterizes business/capitalist companies. Cooperators want to satisfy their own needs and maximize usability. The criterion for assessing the effects of their actions and operations lies therefore in the sense of needs fulfilment, the satisfaction in achievement, and the usefulness and effectiveness of actions undertaken.

Cooperatives fulfil a triple role: economic, social, and democratic. As economic actors, cooperatives create jobs and opportunities for income; as social organizations built on a common goal and a common bond, cooperatives enhance protection and security and contribute to equality and social justice; and as democratically controlled and governed

organizations, cooperatives play a constructive role in communities and nations and in society and politics (Schwettmann, 2014).

The long history of the cooperative movement shows that it is possible to speak of the cooperative development paradigm. It is based on private property and market allocation of resources, democracy of governance, openness and tolerance. An important component of the cooperative model of development is closely linked with a region. Locality attaches members, their goals and capital to their place on the ground (Zimnoch, 2016). There is no speculation and pursuit of profit elsewhere.

Cooperative organizations have gained renewed interest as potentially important players in what Bennett and Lemelin (2014) labelled as the “eco-social economy.” This was achieved by building their organizations around local sustainability practices and adhering to the community-oriented membership financing structures that are the hallmark of the cooperative model. They appear far more embedded in the local community and are active in sponsoring community events and courting local investment.

### **Cooperatives in Poland**

Polish cooperatives in individual industries/trades were created as early as the period of annexations, before Poland regained independence in 1918, and in the first years of independence. Therefore, historically, their mission was seen by the founding members as preserving Polish national ownership of resources: land, capital, labour and science. Thugutt (1945) claimed: “The establishment of cooperatives equals building fortresses of Polishness”. This economic patriotism was, and is declared to this day, by dairy cooperatives, housing cooperatives, cooperative banks, and PSSs (Powszechna Spółdzielnia Spożywców; PSS translates into a common food cooperative).

Some Polish cooperative sectors have a shorter history. Agricultural Production Cooperatives were created in the process of brutal collectivization of the Polish countryside carried out by the Communists in the 1950s. In this case, unlike during the creation of the pre-war agricultural associations, or any cooperatives in general – where the members' private resources are joined together – private property of other people was taken over (often under the constraint of people's power) by those who created an agricultural production cooperative. Similarly, Municipal Cooperatives “Samopomoc Chłopska”, after World War II, took over small agricultural cooperatives and manufacturing facilities as a part of the ‘collectivisation’ process. Social cooperatives and Cooperative Agricultural Producers Groups have an even shorter history. However, in the case of these cooperatives, there is a socio-economic policy interference coming down to co-financing the activities of such cooperatives, using the budget or off-budget resources. Accordingly, in those cases it is difficult to talk about the autonomy of the establishment and operation of such cooperatives.

Polish cooperatives have faced some difficulties accessing bank loans. The basic need for money as a medium of exchange led to the creation of a Polish local currency used in business-to-business settlements – PLZ (Polish Zielony). The authors of the Polish local currency claimed: “If you want to have an influence – create a cooperative” (<https://zielony.biz.pl/>). That kind of cooperative entrepreneurship, as is claimed by Stryjan (2014), is rarely noticed by researchers of social aspects of management, and yet it is still an important element of sustainable development.

In traditional education, until the 1990s, the differences in goals and motives between cooperatives and corporations were distinctly underlined. A corporation, with its pragmatic approach to the business of maximizing profits, needed decades to understand the necessity to fulfil social and environmental aims complementary to economic gains. Despite the fact that cooperatives have been pursuing social and environmental goals since the beginning of their existence, few researchers in Poland deal with cooperatives or in particular cooperative entrepreneurship (Stryjan, 2014). More voluminous research can be found on the topic of corporate sustainability than on cooperative sustainability. However, researching cooperatives can be seen as essential given their long history and tradition, their presence in various branches of the economy, and their attitude of inclusion.

### **Sustainable Development Values**

In recent decades, the human imprint on the natural world has increased dramatically due to emissions of greenhouse gases and growth of the urban population (Sarkar and Searcy, 2016). These changes have drawn attention to global sustainable development, a concept which addresses economic, environmental, and social issues. These issues are typically viewed as the three key pillars of sustainability.

The understanding of sustainability has been influenced by three main groups: ecologists, business strategists, and the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development, called the “Brundtland Commission”. Ecologists’ concept of sustainability is said to have been coined in 1712 by the German nobleman Hans Carl von Carlowitz and referred to the sustainable production of wood. In the 1970s, the term was adopted by the ecological movement concerned with the over-exploitation of natural and environmental resources of the planet (Mazur, 2015). While ecologists focus on sustainability’s ecological dimension – the protection of the natural environment – the traditional goal of business strategy scholars is the economic sustainability of organizations (Mazur, 2016). Business strategists link the term “sustainability” with “sustainable competitive advantage”. The World Commission on Environment and Development was initiated by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1982, and its report, *Our Common Future*, was published in 1987. The Brundtland Commission added a social dimension to the ecological and economic ones, defining sustainable development as a development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Since its dissemination through the Brundtland Report, suggest Sarkar and Searcy (2016), the notion of sustainability has been associated with ecological issues in business practice primarily.

The concept of sustainable development emphasises two notions: development and sustainability. A study by the Board on Sustainable Development of the U.S. National Academy of Sciences sought to bring some order to the broad literature its members reviewed. The National Research Council, in its report *Our Common Journey: A Transition toward Sustainability*, focused on the seemingly inherent distinction between what advocates and analysts sought to sustain and what they sought to develop. The results of that research are shown in Figure 1 below.

| WHAT IS TO BE SUSTAINED:  | WHAT IS TO BE DEVELOPED:   |
|---|--|
| <b>NATURE</b><br>Earth<br>Biodiversity<br>Ecosystems                  | <b>PEOPLE</b><br>Child survival<br>Life expectancy<br>Education<br>Equity<br>Equal opportunity |
| <b>LIFE SUPPORT</b><br>Ecosystem services<br>Resources<br>Environment | <b>ECONOMY</b><br>Wealth<br>Productive sectors<br>Consumption                                  |
| <b>COMMUNITY</b><br>Cultures<br>Groups<br>Places                      | <b>SOCIETY</b><br>Institutions<br>Social capital<br>States, regions                            |

**Figure 1.** Definitions of sustainable development

*Source: U.S. National Research Council, Policy Division, Board on Sustainable Development, Our Common Journey: A Transition toward Sustainability (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1999) as per: Kates, Parris, Leiserowitz, 2005, p.11.*

Under the heading “what is to be sustained,” the board identified three major categories – nature, life support systems, and community – as well as intermediate categories for each. Drawing from the surveyed literature, the board found that most commonly, emphasis was placed on life support systems, which defined nature or the environment as a source of services for the utilitarian life support of humankind (Kates, Parris, Leiserowitz, 2005).

Similarly, there were three quite distinct ideas about what should be developed: people, the economy, and society. Much of the early literature focused on economic development, with productive sectors providing employment, desired consumption, and wealth. More recently, attention has shifted to human development, including an emphasis on values and goals, such as increased life expectancy, education, equity, and opportunity. Finally, the Board on Sustainable Development also identified calls to develop society that emphasized the values of security and well-being of national states, regions, and institutions as well as the social capital of relationships and community ties.

There was ready agreement in the literature that sustainable development implies linking what is to be sustained with what is to be developed, but here, too, as claimed by Kates, Parris, and Leiserowitz (2005, p.12), the emphasis has often differed from extremes of “sustain only” to “develop mostly” to various forms of “and/or.”

**METHODOLOGY**

The research question this work attempts to answer is whether the values declared by Polish cooperatives are parallel to the sustainable development paradigm.

In order to answer this question, the following research objectives were set: to provide comprehensive information on the topic of sustainable development and

cooperatives' values, to identify the values communicated by Polish cooperatives on their websites, and to critically analyse whether those values are consistent with sustainable development values.

The following research methods were used to achieve the objectives:

1. A review of literature concerning sustainable development from the point of view of its underlying values; a review of literature concerning values on which cooperative activities are founded;
2. A website content analysis examining the content of Polish cooperatives' websites in search of declarations regarding their values;
3. A comparative study of values declared by cooperatives with sustainable development values highlighted in the literature.

In search of the values that guide Polish cooperatives, a study of the content of their webpages was carried out. The juxtaposition further on in this work was made on the basis of an analysis of records from the cooperatives' websites. Moreover, information from the cooperatives' branch trade websites operating in Poland was used as well.

For the purpose of this article, 150 cooperatives were researched between March 3<sup>rd</sup> and March 15<sup>th</sup>, 2017. The websites of 105 cooperatives included articulated values or missions. There were 45 cooperatives in the sample whose websites contained only contact details and commercial offers.

The cooperatives in the research were divided according to the economic branch they operate in, also taking into consideration their history and size. The characteristics of the surveyed cooperatives, including the industry, the year of the oldest cooperative foundation in the industry, and the number of cooperatives operating in a given industry in 2016, are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

### Characteristics of the cooperatives in the study

|    | Cooperative industry                                       | Establishment year of the oldest cooperative in the industry | Number of cooperatives operating in 2016 |
|----|--|--|--|
| 1  | Municipal cooperatives "Samopomoc Chłopska"                | 1951   | 1115                                     |
| 2  | Dairy cooperatives   | 1896   | 137                                      |
| 3  | Beekeeping and gardening cooperatives                      | 1884   | 52                                       |
| 4  | Agricultural Production Cooperatives                       | 1948   | 682                                      |
| 5  | Agricultural associations                                  | 1862   | 489                                      |
| 6  | Cooperative Banks  | 1861   | 563                                      |
| 7  | PSS "Spółem"   | 1868   | 310                                      |
| 8  | Housing cooperatives                                       | 1890   | 3722                                     |
| 9  | Labour and Services Cooperatives and Building Cooperatives | 1872   | 576                                      |
| 10 | Cooperatives of the Blind and Disabled                     | 1944   | 167                                      |
| 11 | Folk and Art Crafts Cooperatives "Cepelia"                 | 1926 (1946)  | 6  |
| 12 | Handicrafts cooperatives                                   | 1933   | 133                                      |
| 13 | Cooperative Savings and Credit Unions                      | 1861   | 55                                       |
| 14 | Social cooperatives  | 2006   | 1054                                     |

|    |   |      |      |
|----|---|------|------|
| 15 | Cooperative Agricultural Producers Groups | 2000 | 20   |
|    | Total                                     |      | 9532 |

*Source: Authors' own elaboration based on [www.krs.org.pl](http://www.krs.org.pl)*

## RESEARCH RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Cooperatives representing the 15 groups listed in Table 1 were reviewed. The results of this review are presented in Table 2. The first column, containing the number, refers to Table 1 and indicates the group of the respective cooperative. The second column provides information from the cooperative's website on the purpose of their activities. The third and fourth columns indicate the recipients of the cooperative's activities and the manner in which they are implemented.

Table 2

**Actions (*what we do, for whom and how*) and values of cooperatives according to their websites**

|    | Action/Mission   | For whom   | How  |
|----|--|--|--|
| 1. | Our primary goal is to provide the local community with basic food and industrial products needed in daily operations and necessary for the development of agricultural production.  | We provide students with practical skills needed in their occupations: butcher, baker, seller, cook.<br>We work with many organizations and associations active in the local community, we take part in regional and national trade fairs and exhibitions. | In our work, we follow our hearts so that we can reach the hearts of others through our products. The quality of our bread is the quality of our work. Baking bread is more than a job for us.   |
| 2. | In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, on Polish lands under foreign occupation, an urgent need to create a new independent national personnel necessary in each region was present. An important decision to start a Polish dairy cooperative was made. | Dairy cooperatives are owned by their members and strive to maximize the satisfaction of both suppliers and consumers. Improving qualifications and continuous staff training at all levels of management.   | Respect for customers' health through production of healthy products and effective management of food safety throughout the whole food chain. Intensive development and implementation of innovative technical and organizational solutions on a global level, taking into account the impact on the environment and the food's health safety. |
| 3. | Buying and selling vegetables, fruit and honey from bee hives in various regions of Poland.  | Organizing seasonal fairs providing a unique opportunity for stocking up on healthy and cheap fruit, vegetables, honey and regional products.  | Each batch of honey is thoroughly tested (...) The buyer is assured that it is devoid of residues of veterinary medicines.   |
| 4. | Profitably located lands are a cooperative's great capital.  | Associating farmers from our region; our cooperation is based on mutual complementarity.   | Our products are organic, produced entirely in a natural way.  |

|     |  |   |   |
|-----|--|---|---|
| 5.  | (...) taking initiatives to foster a multi-functional development of rural areas   | The shape of the Organization is given by its members; the Organization helps its members in the implementation of their professional interests.  | Today, the objective of the agricultural associations is a rational multiplication and use of assets for members, agricultural production and the environment.  |
| 6.  | The mission of the Cooperative Bank, the bank of the local communities, is providing members, clients with the financial services they need (...).   | The provision of complex, modern and professional banking services for the local community and the stakeholders, financial services in accordance with the ideals of cooperativeness and aiming to activate the development of the local environment.               | There are institutions which are defined by one word – honesty. Honesty towards customers, manifested in offering transparent, reliable and safe products and financial services.   |
| 7.  | A developed network of shops, thousands of products, onsite production, catering establishments, conference and banquet centres.   | The Universal Cooperative of Grocers "SPOŁEM" is one of the largest employers in many cities. It is here that we pay taxes, thus contributing to the development of our city.   | Maintenance and development of a cooperative form of management based on reliability, confidence, ability to adjust the offer to all buyers' expectations. They rely on tradition and quality. Good quality for a fair price.   |
| 8.  | Housing cooperatives were established (...) adopting for their purpose the housing needs fulfilment of members and their families and the needs resulting from living in the cooperative settlements.  | Almost from the very beginning they have operated in the socio-cultural clubs, which raise generations of children through the formation of interest, providing opportunities for development. Seniors also have the opportunity to meet and pursue their passions. | Environmental protection is one of the main objectives that guides housing cooperatives. Rational development and management of environmental resources in accordance with the principles of sustainable development; recycling, in today's urbanized world, is an extremely important issue. |
| 9.  | We combine our resources and together we provide construction services to our customers.   | Supports cooperative employees who want to upgrade or change their qualifications and who want to create a cooperative.   | More than 60 years of history, an experienced and qualified staff and a developed machine park allow us to promote our long-term customers' opinion: Labour and Services cooperatives and Building cooperatives are solid companies.  |
| 10. | To help people with disabilities and rehabilitate them in the work process; to provide employment for people with disabilities, which, in addition to professional activation, gives them a sense of social acceptance and participation in public life. | The cooperative's mission is to help people with disabilities and rehabilitate them in the work process.  | By taking into account the environmentally friendly nature of production and humane treatment of each employee, especially disabled ones; using the principle of equal opportunities irrespective of sex, racial or ethnic origin, religion or belief, age or sexual orientation.             |
| 11. | The aim of "Cepelia" is to protect, organize, develop and promote handicrafts and folk art and industry.   | The area of cooperation of the cooperative is the territory of the Republic of Poland and abroad.   | Preservation of traditional values concerning the material qualities of the Polish nation, preservation of the nation's cultural identity.  |



|     |   |   |  |
|-----|---|---|--|
| 12. | Teaching professions: from the most modern to the most unique, especially those of an artistic and handicraft character.  | Cooperatives award apprentice and master diplomas.  | An important issue is to promote safe work practices and ethics in the workplace.  |
| 13. | Providing financial services and attention to the development and improvement of the system of credit unions; cooperation between credit unions.  | Concern for the members of credit unions; shaping civic attitudes among members; joint responsibility for common matters.   | Unions' fundamental values are: honesty; building mutual trust; being guided by prudence; shaping civic attitudes among members; thriftiness.  |
| 14. | Professional integration and overcoming exclusion in the labour market.   | Cooperatives are based on the combined needs and aspirations of people in the place where they live.  | Defining public interest as a primary goal, realization directly through the production of goods and services of general interest.   |
| 15. | Manufacturing agricultural products or agricultural product groups, guided by quality; natural environment preservation; conducting cultural and educational activities for the benefit of members and the environment. | Local roots – actions within the community and on its behalf are another common feature of cooperative groups of producers. Special funds provide assistance for local school centres and social organizations. | New possibilities for farmers allowing for an improvement of farms' profitability by getting better conditions for the sale of products (larger batches); lower costs of production resources. |

*Source: Authors' own elaboration based on, among others: [kzrss.spolem.org.pl/](http://kzrss.spolem.org.pl/), [www.zlsp.org.pl/pl/](http://www.zlsp.org.pl/pl/), [zrsmrp.com.pl/](http://zrsmrp.com.pl/), [www.mleczarstwopolskie.pl/](http://www.mleczarstwopolskie.pl/), [www.kzrrsp.pl/](http://www.kzrrsp.pl/), [zrbs.pl/](http://zrbs.pl/), [ozrss.pl/](http://ozrss.pl/), [kwww.zrp.pl](http://kwww.zrp.pl) [zrsiisn.pl/](http://zrsiisn.pl/), [www.kzrs.pl/](http://www.kzrs.pl/) and websites of individual member cooperatives.*

The values presented on the websites of the surveyed cooperatives are in accord with the paradigm of sustainable development. Among them, there are those that relate to what should be developed as well as those that relate to what should be sustained. Both groups of values are presented in Tables 3 and 4 and commented on below.

Table 3

### What is to be developed – values

|         |  |
|---------|--|
| People  | educating youth, staff education, entrepreneurship of the members, professionalism, workers' safety, equality of opportunities, flexibility, honesty, transparency, reliability, safety, transfer of experience; |
| Economy | products' quality, local cooperation, good price, entrepreneurship of the members, business from generation to generation;   |
| Society | integrating the excluded into society, occupational integration, culture, the development of the local community and members, citizenship.   |

*Source: Authors' own elaboration*

The value groups which, according to the concept of sustainable development, need to be developed are those concerning people, the economy and society. Among the most commonly declared values referring to people are those related to raising qualifications. Among the values referring to the economy, the most frequently indicated are those referring to the region and its development and the development of cooperative members' entrepreneurship. Among values related to society, the following values are emphasized: integrating the excluded into society, occupational integration, trust, the development of the local community and members.

Table 4

**What is to be sustained – values**

|                      |   |
|----------------------|---|
| Nature               | concern for people and the environment, environmental safety, biodiversity, respect for nature, animal welfare;                       |
| Life support systems | environmental awareness, robustness, modern technology, thriftiness, security, humanitarianism;                                       |
| Community            | tradition, solidarity, trust, preservation of cultural identity, community development, little homeland, public utility, common home. |

*Source: Authors' own elaboration*

The value groups which, according to the concept of sustainable development, need to be sustained are those concerning nature, life support systems and community. Among the values that – according to the sustainable development concept – need to be sustained, we find the following: environmental concerns, life support systems such as awareness of activities' impact on ecosystems, and values related to traditional ways of life and universal solidarity.

## CONCLUSIONS

The research question of whether the cooperative development paradigm is parallel to the paradigm of sustainable development was answered positively. Cooperatives' functioning is filled with values important for sustainable development. Values fundamental to the concept of sustainable development occur in two groups: the group of values pertaining to what should be developed (people, the economy, society), and the group of values pertaining to what should be sustained (nature, life support systems, community). Values indicated online by cooperatives in the scope of this research belong to both of the value groups which are fundamental to the concept of sustainable development.

The values declared by cooperatives of individual industries have also confirmed the continuity of the values and ideas of the cooperative movement. On their websites, cooperators indicate specifically – our mission, our values. Many small cooperatives describe their activity as "what we do". Sorting the values presented by the cooperatives according to the scheme "what we do, for whom and how we operate" allows for the following classification (rank) of cooperative values in the group: basic needs fulfilment, local communities, concern for the health, development and safety of people and the environment.

The above analysis allows us to draw the conclusion that the fulfilment of basic needs of cooperative members, consumers and manufacturers is an actually achieved goal. Cooperatives are needed, because they bake bread, make sausages and produce honey. They collect and process milk and other agricultural materials. They allow for the creation of "one's own home." They provide credits and safely store savings. Their functioning is based on simple principles. They emphasize the importance of tradition, because they are with their customers for generations. Their actions fit perfectly with the concept of sustainable development, proving that implementing this concept does not always require revolutionary changes in the business world.

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