

SEEDING

Social Economy Enterprises addressing
Digitalisation, Industrial Relations and the European Pillar of Social Rights

National event - France

Tuesday 27 July 2021 (10:00-12:00 CET)

Platform: Zoom

NOTES

The SEEDING project online local event in France was hosted by Diesis and co-organized by the **Centro Studi Doc Foundation**, a research center based in Verona (Italy) that carries out research to support the dignity of work through the cooperative model in all economic and social sectors where there is little social protection and decent work is not recognised. The event was organized online and of course with free admission open to public after registration. There were 39 registrations and a total of **20 participants on Zoom**.

The seminar was titled **Democratising digital platforms with cooperation** (original title: *Démocratiser les plateformes numériques avec la coopération*) and its goal was to dialogue with some experts on how cooperatives can contribute to building a fair, democratic and accessible digital economy.

The chair of the event, **Francesca Martinelli** (Centro Studi Doc Foundation), after presenting the SEEDING project, introduced the French local meeting. The researcher explained that the meeting would focus on the relationship between digital platforms and cooperatives, also presenting concrete cases of how cooperatives relate to digital platforms. After an introductory talk of each speaker, a discussion followed based on questions from the audience. Below the answers to the questions are integrated into the summary of the speakers' speeches.

The first speaker, **Cynthia Srnec**, Associate researcher at the LITEM Laboratory (University of Paris-Saclay, University of Evry, ITM-BS), described how cooperative platforms could become a model of fair innovation for workers' emancipation. The researcher presented an overview of the relationship between technology and cooperation starting with an introduction to the sharing economy and digital platforms. Using three criteria, which are inclusive or non-inclusive governance, principles and typology of propriety (level of access to the enterprise), it is possible to identify four models and typologies of platforms within the sharing economy that allow distinguishing platform cooperativism from platform capitalism, and which are: capitalist platform, general interest or open platform, cooperative community platform, and workers' cooperative platform. In France, three statuses can be identified that are particularly used by platform cooperatives (SCOP, SCIC and BEC/CAE), of which there are several examples in the Country (e.g. COOPGO, Les Oiseaux de Passage, CoopCycle, Coopaname, etc.). Considering the relationship among them, French

platform cooperatives gather under the network and working group "[Plateformes en Communs](#)". Srniec underlined also that during the COVID-19 crisis, French platform cooperatives played an important role by providing their expertise to support workers and vulnerable people. For the future of platform cooperatives in France, she recognised their need for state support (labour regulation, economic activity and social protection), the importance to foster alliances among SSE actors, public bodies and citizenship with a positive social, ecological and economic impact, and the development of international links (international cooperative movement, ILO).

Arnaud Delcasse, executive manager of [COOPGO](#) focused on the link that can be created between mobility and collective interest if we put cooperatives at the service of the territories. He started explaining that COOPGO (SCOP), founded in 2015 with a carpooling app called Ridygo, is interested in the challenges of mobility, and its main objectives are: to fight against the omnipresence of the individual car; to help all those who refuse job opportunities because they do not have a means of transport (e.g. elderly, disabled people). Their activity is based on accompanying employers, territorial realities and employment centres to the integration of different means of transport through a digital platform usable through an application. In COOPGO, technology and platforms play a very important role, and all COOPGO's tools are developed internally by the cooperative. For instance, they research how to use blockchain to ensure interoperability between different mobility systems without the user having to subscribe to each service separately. Considering the issue of financing these technological innovation activities, being considered an innovative enterprise, COOPGO accesses dedicated funds. They also access public funds dedicated to social innovation and have been the object of investments by the General Confederation of Cooperatives and the region. In the mobility sector, many digital platforms have emerged, creating social and environmental problems. The problem with these capitalist platforms is that they are deregulated activities that do not respect local balances and the collective, social or environmental interest, but are only geared towards the interests of investors and profit. To tackle this issue is firstly necessary to regulate these models. Then, cooperatives and the social and solidarity economy should take the opportunities for social innovation that exists beyond public services, creating complementary (and non-competitive) solutions. Thanks to its democratic structure and the ability to exploit the networks of the territory and to activate the different actors in the area they belong to, the cooperative model is easily able to take into account the challenges of social and environmental impact on the territory.

Samuel Cohen, executive manager of [France Barter](#), explained how to organise a community of companies around "bartering", which is a virtuous and collaborative way of trading, starting from the experience of France Barter, founded as a multi-stakeholder cooperative in 2014. The "barter" (in French: *troc*) is an innovative B2B payment tool that allows entrepreneurs to finance part of their purchases in exchange for the sale of services or goods to clients of the network. This method of trade is based on trust and the communication by each member of the network of its offers and needs. In France Barter, customers buy and sell in Bart€r. In terms of inter-cooperation, in France Barter there are many cooperatives, since they

share the same values, but there is no internal network dedicated only to them. To create the community and develop in it peer-to-peer financing, the choice of the cooperative form (SCIC) was important because it ensured transparency and trust among enterprises who accepted to use this form of payment. But from 30 June 2021 France Barter has left the cooperative status mainly due to economic and financial difficulties. Like many sharing economy platforms, their business model takes commissions on the transactions that take place on the platform. In the beginning, they did not have enough critical mass to grow and therefore had a very long launch time – unlike classic start-ups that have to deliver results in a short time. To overcome the difficulties related to slower growth, they did a successful crowdfunding campaign in 2017, that also responded well to the characteristics of the cooperative model being a form of collaborative financing. In 2020, they experienced good growth and needed to hire some specific figures and reorganise the platform, so they activated a fundraising campaign among solidarity finance actors. Investors showed no interest in investing in a company that does not allow remunerate shares with a high-risk rate, but only grants bonds. Therefore, to obtain funding and to continue the activity, after a long debate, France Barter decided to leave the cooperative status. Former cooperative members accepted the situation explaining that they are more interested in shared values, quality of services and community building.

Arnaud Breuil is Director of Partnerships and Cooperation of [Groupe Up](#) (SCOP), which is a worker cooperative established in 1964 to offer service vouchers at B2B level in a network of affiliates. From the beginning, they decided to associate the beneficiaries of their services through trade unions, which are also part of the board of directors. The advent of digital has changed the way they work both for internal and external reasons. Internally, Groupe Up has chosen to use new technologies to develop applications and software that have renewed the company. They chose to support the digital transformation through the development of new skills in their employees both to continue to grow their employees and to be competitive on the market with capitalist platforms. Externally, this digitalisation has changed the traditional relationship with the beneficiaries of their services: thanks to new technologies they now know better the needs not only of the companies that ask them for their services but also of the employees who use them. The advent of capitalist platforms affected their enterprise. Firstly, because the activity of Group Up is based on the status of salaried workers and is therefore suffering from the deregulation of work processes brought about by platforms. Second, due to their strong link with the representation of the salaried work in France, they have also accompanied working groups dedicated to new forms of work to find mainly cooperative solutions and develop alternative platforms and support workers. For example, they realised that one of the great difficulties workers face is having access to information about labour law. That is why Groupe Up has developed an application that allows workers to know and manage all the social rights that are applicable in the company (e.g. collective agreements, how smart working works, etc.), have a direct chat with union representatives, send notifications. Technology can contribute to improving

working conditions, for example enabling the development of tools to strengthen workers' access to social rights.

The last speaker, **Mila Shamku**, who is Advocacy Coordinator at [CECOP](#) (European Confederation of Work and Social Cooperatives), took the discussion to an international level by explaining where we stand among cooperatives and digital platforms, European advocacy and international perspectives. First, she distinguished between the three types of cooperatives that are part of CECOP: worker cooperative (SCOP in France), social cooperative (SCIC in France), and cooperative of independent workers (BEC/CAE in France). They are mainly focused in service cooperatives and what happens to the working conditions of people who end up in bogus self-employment. About the subject of platforms, international organisations such as CECOP are particularly interested in the fact that digital technology has a very strong impact on the economy and should therefore not be underestimated. At the level of the European Commission, CECOP has noticed a certain interest in the topic of cooperative platforms especially concerning atypical work, which is particularly present in digital platforms, in the framework of the Platform Work Initiative. From the advocacy point of view, there have thus been opportunities, but also difficulties, such as the fact that the role of cooperatives for the existing platforms is not fully clear and more work is needed to make it well understood. To address these issues, CECOP works alongside researchers and traditional trade unions and organises specialised working groups. Thanks to this work, in a 2020 policy paper addressed to the European Commission (more info [here](#)), CECOP underlines how cooperatives can tackle platform work and their related policy needs; needs which Mila Shamku has explained in her second speech.

Concluding the meeting, the chair Francesca Martinelli pointed out that during the seminar experiences were presented that overturn the power relations of capitalist platforms, putting people and the commons at the centre. The reason for this disruption is rooted in the principles and reasons by which technology is built since the technology itself is neutral. Thus, what differentiates platforms is not so much the technology used as the type of organisation and the principles and values that characterise it. If behind a capitalist platform there are the elusive *unicorn companies*, behind a cooperative platform there is what we can call a **Pegasus company**, which is a cooperative enterprise that brings people together in a project of community and mutual promotion.

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