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THEMATIC ARTICLE

New municipalism and management of the common: the experience of *Red de Municipios Cooperativos* (Argentine Republic, 2016-2022)

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Abstract

This article aims to present an experience of public policy generation, elaborating on the exchange between local bureaucracies and the cooperative sector under the precept of generating an economic dynamic associated with cooperative local purchases, in which credit is a relevant dimension for the generation and maintenance of local sources of employment and the strengthening of the municipal economic structure. The new municipalism as a theoretical approach allows the conceptualization of the Red de Municipios Cooperativos of the Argentine Republic as a tool for community governance and urban management. Through primary sources (semi-structured interviews and field observations) and secondary sources (academic bibliography and official reports), the history of the Red de Municipios Cooperativos is reviewed (from 2016 to the present) and its limitations and potentialities are analyzed regarding the improvement of the sustainability of the associative experiences that access the financing for local purchases within the framework of the network. Regarding the conclusions, the capacity of initiatives at the local level to strengthen municipal economies autonomously from national public policies stands out.

Keywords: New municipalism. Management of the common. Solidarity economy. Public policies. Sustainability.

O novo municipalismo e a gestão do comum: a experiência do Red de Municipios Cooperativos (República Argentina, 2016-2022)

Resumo

O objetivo deste artigo é apresentar uma experiência de geração de políticas públicas elaboradas no intercâmbio entre burocracias locais e o setor cooperativo sob o preceito de gerar uma dinâmica econômica associada às compras locais cooperativas, em que o crédito é uma dimensão relevante para a geração e manutenção das fontes locais de emprego e fortalecimento da estrutura econômica municipal. O novo municipalismo como abordagem teórica permite conceituar a Red de Municipios Cooperativos da República Argentina como ferramenta de governança comunitária e de gestão urbana. Por meio de fontes primárias (entrevistas semiestruturadas e observações de campo) e fontes secundárias (bibliografia acadêmica e relatórios oficiais), recupera-se a história da Red de Municipios Cooperativos (de 2016 até o presente) e analisam-se suas limitações e potencialidades sobre a melhoria da sustentabilidade das experiências associativas que acedem ao financiamento de compras locais no âmbito da rede. Quanto às conclusões, destaca-se a capacidade das iniciativas em nível local para fortalecer as economias municipais independentemente das políticas públicas nacionais.

Palavras-chave: Novo municipalismo. Gestão do comum. Economia solidária. Políticas públicas. Sustentabilidade.

El nuevo municipalismo y la gestión de lo común: la experiencia de la Red de Municipios Cooperativos (República Argentina, 2016-2022)

Resumen

El presente artículo tiene la finalidad de presentar una experiencia de generación de políticas públicas elaboradas en el intercambio entre burocracias locales y sector cooperativo bajo el precepto de generar una dinámica económica asociada al compre local cooperativo, en el que el crédito es una dimensión relevante para la generación y sostenimiento de fuentes de empleo locales y el fortalecimiento de la estructura económica municipal. El nuevo municipalismo como enfoque teórico permite la conceptualización de la Red de Municipios Cooperativos de la República Argentina como una herramienta de gobernanza comunitaria y de gestión urbana. A través de fuentes primarias (entrevistas semiestructuradas y observaciones de campo) y secundarias (bibliografía académica e informes oficiales), se recupera la historia de la Red de Municipios Cooperativos (desde 2016 a la actualidad) y se analizan sus limitaciones y potencialidades en cuanto al mejoramiento de la sostenibilidad de las experiencias asociativas que acceden al financiamiento para el compre local en el marco de la red. En cuanto a las conclusiones, se destaca la capacidad de las iniciativas a escala local de fortalecer las economías municipales de forma autónoma a las políticas públicas nacionales.

Palabras clave: Nuevo municipalismo. Gestión de lo común. Economía solidaria. Políticas públicas. Sostenibilidad.

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INTRODUCTION

This article[1] addresses the relationship between municipal policies and the solidarity economy, more precisely, it seeks to analyze the characteristics that this connection takes on in the experience of the *Red de Municipios Cooperativos* (Cooperative Municipalities Network of Argentina) since its emergence in 2016. Here, the aim is to present an experience of the generation of public policies developed in the exchange between local bureaucracies and the cooperative sector to create tools for cooperative local procurement, in which credit is a relevant dimension for the generation and sustainability of local employment sources and the strengthening of the municipal economic structure. The conceptual questions guiding the research are: What are the particularities that initiatives oriented towards exploring a renewed role of the municipal agenda in local productive structures assume?; What aspects of the "new municipalism" approach shed light on the experience of this Network, as well as identify its possible limitations and potentialities?; Specifically, to what extent are they opportunities for articulation of actors for the management of the common good?; What is the role of experiences of solidarity economy and its organizations in the construction of the Network?; How to trace a path of co-construction and co-production of municipal policies in relation to the degrees of autonomy that associative experiences supported and fostered in those policies can embrace?

The object of study of this article is the *Red de Municipios Cooperativos*, created in October 2016 in the Argentine Republic, an initiative that continues to be active today. The research is organized based on a qualitative approach, focused mainly on primary sources (field observation, six semi-structured interviews with municipal, national, and cooperative officials) and secondary sources (academic literature and official reports).

The article is organized into three sections. First, various themes associated with new municipalism are briefly reviewed, incorporating references to institutional activism and the potential of the local scale for understanding new political agendas in America and Europe. In the following section, a brief chronology of the emergence and evolution of the *Red de Municipios Cooperativos* from 2016 to the present is presented. Subsequently, this initiative is problematized in light of analyzing different factors that contribute to its intertemporal sustainability. The article concludes with reflections that invite further consideration of the generation and replicability of urban management public policies through local procurement tools.

NEW MUNICIPALISM: AGENDA OF TOPICS

The "new municipalism" is an approach through which, from the field of research and also from politics, the interfaces between local policies and collective action have been analyzed. Although relatively recent, the broad agenda of topics related to new municipalism is present on both sides of the Atlantic.

A brief and non-exhaustive characterization of this agenda can be constructed around the following dimensions: i) building the common from community governance; ii) the common as a strategy of collective action for emancipation; iii) the common in relation to the link between state bureaucracy (embodied in municipal technical teams) and associative experiences; iv) the contested common in the state arena; and v) the common as a tool of urban management.

Firstly, for some approaches, it is central to investigate the historical context in which "bottom-up" policies unfold. In this sense, they address a historical period – initiated at the end of the 20th century – where successive social crises developed in the western world. Thus, these types of policies emerge as an alternative to the classical logic of top-down institutional protection (Rendueles & Subirats, 2016). The top-down perspective results in a renewed interest in the idea of the common, in the search for community governance in relation to shared resources (Ostrom, 2012). Among the different conceptualizations of the common, authors like Rosanvallon (2012) focus on the daily activation of solidarity bonds as a complementary form to policies recognizing differences under the notion of communality. As can be seen, this is a critical approach to conceptions of local development as a link with the market (Fernández et al., 2008).

[1] The results of it are based on research conducted during 2022 on the experience of the *Red de Municipios Cooperativos* and the *Programa de Municipios Solidarios* (Solidary Municipalities Program) within the framework of the award obtained in the call for the *Producir Trabajo Program of the Consejo Económico y Social* (Economic and Social Council) (Chief of Cabinet of Ministers of the Argentine Republic).

In the second place, other perspectives focus on observing the relationship between the mentioned crises and the collective action resulting from them. According to Blanco et al. (2018, p. 17), it is worth considering whether citizens' concerns arising from the volatile and disruptive dynamics of globalization and digital transition can find answers in classical models of national social protection or should explore alternatives oriented by the construction of the common in local contexts. In this direction, faced with the difficulties of state management to address inequality, the common emerges as a way to implement an emancipatory response, to generate collective projects of protection and recognition (Blanco et al., 2018).

Thirdly, the very notion of the "common" is often called into question. Laval and Dardot (2013, 2015) highlight the opposition between i) forms of connection based on sharing and the collective elaboration of rules governing populations (Cingolani & Fjeld, 2019) and ii) societies where competition is widespread and promoted by neoliberal devices, which in their dynamics strip individuals and collectivities of control over their own destinies. This consideration is often present in the debate around governments and popular practices as it strains two traditional visions: i) a state-oriented left, for which the development of public services is associated with the State, and ii) an associative left, focused on self-management. In Europe, this approach nourishes and aims at the growth of the so-called "third sector," in the always porous margins between the market and the State. Laval and Dardot (2015) seek to transcend the view that distinguishes both approaches by emphasizing that the common as a principle must reclaim the traditions, legacies, and political meaning of each initiative to become an alternative to neoliberalism. According to the mentioned authors, transcending the dichotomy between state and private management allows citizens to become subjects with the capacity for intervention and participation, with the possibility of exercising their sovereignty and disputing spaces to expert knowledge (Ghibaudi & García, 2022).

Along these lines, fourthly, another approach of new municipalism is highlighted, which conceives the State as an arena where diverse social actors converge and, from different positions, contest the control of state resources. In this direction, initiatives of policies situated at the local level comprise a strategic entry point to develop practices and theories that involve social emancipation. Thus, for some authors, the issue would not be about estimating the functions and limits of the local state, but understanding what can be done with the local state (Russell, 2019, p. 991). Here, the role of institutional activists[2] is emphasized, who can influence decision-making and/or the policy implementation process, favoring mobilized social actors. Another entry point to the analysis of links with the state arena is the consideration, according to Caamaño-López (2022), of the redistribution of functions and resources between central and local governments. Among the potentialities of new municipalism, it is highlighted that the design and implementation of public policies at the local level allow adaptation to economic contingencies determined by subnational, national, and global scales.

Fifthly, Blanco et al. (2018) suggest an instrumental perspective regarding urban management and propose five strategies for the construction of the common: i) territorialization of governance, with an urban model of proximity, linked to the everyday; ii) co-production[3] of urban policies, for the incorporation of socially distributed knowledge; iii) promotion of community action; iv) opening the management to citizenship, with services and urban spaces connected to neighbors, and v) support for social innovation, revaluing solidarity and reciprocity practices of the community fabric. According to Caamaño López (2022, p. 4), there is a relationship between "redistribution of functions and resources between central and local governments, the improvement of local autonomy capacity, the role of community organizations, citizen participation, service provision, and innovations in governance and good practices."

In summary, the perspectives of new municipalism can be defined as an alternative approach that recovers the potential of the local scale to influence the transformation of the territory and also national politics (Caamaño-López, 2022). From a geographical perspective, the study of new municipalism as a phenomenon that develops primarily at the local level can shed light on "coexistence relationships within immediate spaces, in lived and shared territories, where the study of their cohesion and their capabilities to 'build community' would imply a dimension of the construction of dignity, well-being or comparative development" (Misses-Liwerant & Saracho-López, 2021).

[2] According to Pettinicchio (2012, p. 501), "institutional activists are individuals who affect change (from changing organizational norms to political reforms) from within organizations and institutions." In other words, they are members of the state apparatus who "proactively work on issues that overlap with social movements" (Pettinicchio, 2012, p. 502). They can both promote the cause within the state even when popular mobilization has declined and expand existing public policies without pressure from movements.

[3] Vaillancourt and Leclerc (2012) propose a differentiation between co-construction (the participation of actors from civil society and the market in the elaboration of public policies) and coproduction (the participation of these same actors in the implementation of public policies).

RED DE MUNICIPIOS COOPERATIVOS: ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION

The *Red de Municipios Cooperativos* emerged in October 2016, promoted by the Cooperative Confederation of the Argentine Republic (*Confederación Cooperativa de la República Argentina*) – Cooperar – (and its member federations) and government entities from 15 municipalities in different provinces of the country. The process of forming the network began in the 2010s, with exchanges between municipal and cooperative representatives about the need to establish an institutionalized network to formalize pre-existing bonds. This can also be seen as a way of disputing the common in the state arena.

The decision to promote dialogue with second and third-degree cooperative entities, as well as the search to go beyond individual and isolated initiatives, is based on their potential to identify expansion possibilities for the sector and the challenges of articulating with local governments. This articulation with local administrations is linked to the perception of that scale as the most suitable for managing the urban environment where the experiences take place, one of the perspectives of new municipalism mentioned earlier.

One of the first conclusions of the initial situation diagnosis highlighted the territorial expansion of cooperatives as a priority, both in economic and productive terms. Regarding the main obstacles to this expansion, the lack of financing and the problem of mismatch (the time between when a product/service is produced and sold and when payment is received for it) are emphasized.

Following Mendell and Alain (2013) in assuming the solidarity economy[4] as locally embedded, one of the main goals of the Network is to articulate supply and demand and connect state and associative actors. According to Hopp (2017), within policies oriented towards the sector, in addition to legislation aimed at promoting organization in forms of associative and cooperative work, the generation of regulations and institutions for ruling these types of labor units, and social protection of workers stands out.

The aim is to go beyond the local scale and share experiences to promote the replication of different local policy instruments in municipalities, to improve the sustainability[5] of associative experiences.

In the local governments that join the Network there has been a political will[6] to favor the usually marginalized segments of local purchases: cooperatives. Each municipality can define and implement its own policies based on the scale, actors, and productive framework of its particular territory. Both devices focused on emergency assistance (especially during the context of the COVID-19 pandemic) and tools focused on productive promotion have been identified. Cooperatives are usually considered as part of a sector to be strengthened rather than as recipients of social policies.

In the following box, one can see the municipalities and provinces that are part of the *Red de Municipios Cooperativos* (as of January 2023):

[4] As a field under construction, SSE (Social and Solidarity Economy) encompasses various experiences – traditional cooperatives and mutualism, popular economy, *empresas recuperadas* – that typically combine market and non-market elements (Vaillancourt & Leclerc, 2012). Shared characteristics include: improvement of quality of life as a purpose; democratic management based on social justice, horizontality, and reciprocity; and centrality of use value over exchange value (Pastore, 2010; Presta 2015).

[5] Here, sustainability is understood in its broad sense, not limited to the economic profitability of experiences (the generation of sufficient income, commonly known as "strict economic mercantile sustainability"). Thus, both economic and social elements are incorporated into the analysis, including a plurality of economic principles – reciprocity, redistribution, and domestic management – and connections with the community in which they develop (Coraggio, 2008; Vázquez, 2016).

[6] Oscar Minteguía, a leading official in the sector, mentioned in an interview by Ruth Muñoz that three necessary axes can be identified in relation to the development of policies for the sector: i) having the political decision to develop them (especially for resource allocation), ii) having an absolute conviction ("being a militant" in the sector), and iii) designing "real instruments that solve real problems" (Minteguía, 2007, p. 5).

Box 1
***Red de Municipios Cooperativos*: members by province and year of incorporation.**

Province	Municipality and year of incorporation
Buenos Aires	25 de Mayo (2016), Adolfo Alsina (n/d), Bahía Blanca (2019), Castelli (2018), Coronel de Marina Leonardo Rosales (2021), Coronel Pringles (2018), General Alvarado (2019), General Viamonte (n/d), General Villegas (2019), Laprida (2022), Lincoln (2021), Lobería (2019), Marcos Paz (2021), Pehuajó (2020), Rivadavia (2016), San Antonio de Areco (n/d), San Martín (2019), San Miguel del Monte (2021), San Pedro (2020), Tapalqué (2022), Tigre (2021), Tornquist (2022), Trenque Lauquen (2019), Tres Arroyos (2020)
Chaco	Resistencia (2020)
Chubut	Comodoro Rivadavia (2016), El Hoyo (2020)
Córdoba	Almafuerte (n/d), Mendiolaza (2016), Oncativo (2016), Villa María (2016)
Corrientes	Corrientes (2016), Goya (2017)
Entre Ríos	Concepción del Uruguay (2016), Concordia (2020), Gualeguaychú (n/d)
Formosa	Pozo del Tigre (n/d)
Jujuy	Tilcara (2016)
La Pampa	General Pico (2022), Santa Rosa (2022)
La Rioja	La Rioja (Provincia) (2021), La Rioja Capital (2017)
Mendoza	General Alvear (2016), San Carlos (2022)
Misiones	Dos De Mayo (2016)
Rio Negro	Bariloche (2016), Chimpay (2022), Fernández Oro (2022), Maquinchao (2022), Valcheta (2022), Viedma (2022)
Santa Cruz	Pico Truncado (2022), Río Turbio (2022), Santa Cruz (Provincia) (n/d)
Santa Fe	Avellaneda (2019), Empalme Villa Constitución (2019), Fuentes (n/d), Pérez (2020), Venado Tuerto (2016)

Source: Elaborated by the authors based on Red de Municipios Cooperativos (2023).

In 2019, based on previous relationships between cooperative actors and local government officials, the *Programa de Municipios Solidarios* emerged as a financial management tool guided by INAES and promoted by Cooperar and its federations. In the midst of an economic crisis exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic in mid-2020, an effort was made to replicate the cooperative local purchasing strategy deployed by the Municipality of San Martín in the network municipalities interested in adopting it. In this way, associative experiences could transition to becoming providers of products and services to local governments, potentially improving their monthly income and thus enhancing their sustainability, at least in commercial terms. Local purchasing represents a way for them to place their products that would allow for intertemporal reproduction; however, one might question whether it truly constitutes a tool that fosters greater autonomy in cooperatives or, on the contrary, generates dependence.

Both Fecootra (*Federación de Cooperativas de Trabajo de la República Argentina*) (Federation of Worker Cooperatives of the Argentine Republic) and Conarcoop recognize the potential of the tool and convey it to INAES to request financial resources from the institution to expand the initiative to other territories (personal interview, 06/03/2022). Thus, the pandemic posed multiple economic emergencies but also served as a testing ground for public policies.

In 2020, a pilot collaboration agreement was established between the Municipality of San Martín and INAES. Building on the precedent of multiple municipal ordinances aimed at local purchasing and the initiative of San Martín's Solidarity Financing Fund, a mechanism for granting credits was devised. The definition of the purpose, the design of instruments, contracts, evaluation forms, and guarantees of the financial scheme to ensure rotation and control were initially the responsibility of the Municipality of San Martín. Regarding the nature of the development and implementation of this collaboration, it is interesting to ponder whether it is a process of co-construction or coproduction of public policies (Vaillancourt & Leclerc, 2012).

In terms of institutional framework, the Municipality of San Martín has three ordinances (11262/2012; 11327/2012; and 11835/2015) that promote cooperative purchasing through the Municipal Purchasing Program for social enterprises and cooperatives. The central objective of these ordinances is to simplify economic relations between the municipal and cooperative spheres. Among the government's powers, the ordinances allow local authorities to select cooperatives as providers, even if they exceed a conventional company's budget by 5% (personal interview, 07/13/2022). This indicates a positive valuation of promoting local cooperative production, conceived as a tool for urban management.

In the case of San Martín, the municipal technical team gathered documentation and conducted an evaluation of the specific conditions of the supplier (personal interview, 07/13/2022). To do this, they requested, for example, financial statements from cooperatives interested in participating as suppliers to the local government. In this way, there was an effort to strengthen the legal and accounting structures of the sector, aiming to establish administrative routines. In the long term, it is expected that these efforts will result in the stabilization of the productive and commercial capacity of the sector, as well as the sustainability of the relationship between the municipal technical team and the cooperative. This is a strategic point to ensure that, even in contexts unfavorable at the national political level, local policies can continue to function.

The scheme arising from the pilot agreement between the Municipality of San Martín and INAES is organized as follows: i) a municipality addresses a specific demand in its management and communicates with some of the cooperative suppliers of the required good or service; ii) a purchase request is made to the cooperative; iii) a purchase order is issued; iv) the local government requests authorization from a federation of cooperatives for it to evaluate and transfer funds in the form of working capital to the selected cooperative; v) with these resources, the cooperative produces the agreed-upon good or service; vi) once the produced good or service is marketed as agreed with the local government, the cooperative returns the funds provided by the federation of cooperatives as working capital to the federation's account (personal interviews, 06/02/2022 and 06/03/2022). In this way, the provision of financing serves the function of advance, preventing the mismatch that occurs in the months involved in administrative processes (personal interview, 07/13/2022).

So, it's the municipalities that submit the request, assess, and monitor, while Fecootra manages the resources. Municipalities act as intermediaries to streamline the process: they send the cooperative's documentation along with copies of the order requests (prior to the issuance of work orders) to Fecootra, and this federation transfers directly to the cooperatives during the same week (personal interviews, 06/02/2022, 06/03/2022, and 06/10/2022).

Decisions about which cooperative will bid for local procurement are tied to the sector to be supplied, the urgency, and the specific needs of municipal management. Once the context of pandemic-related isolation and social distancing was overcome, the sectors covered by the program began to diversify (personal interviews, 06/02/2022, 06/03/2022, and 06/10/2022).

With an initial funding of 9.1 million pesos from INAES, Fecootra served as the fund administrator to ensure that these resources had autonomous management at the local level (personal interview, 06/02/2022 and 03/06/2022). The goal was to avoid discretion in the hirings, in addition to ensuring transparency in the management of cooperative resources. The first of the two agreements' funds were turned over 3.55 times in the period 2020-2022, with no reported delays.

It's worth noting that the credit design with the fund financed through the INAES-Cooperar agreement (which formed the *Programa de Municipios Solidarios*) is not yet available for all municipalities within the *Red de Municipios Cooperativos*. After the initial disbursement of 9.1 million pesos allocated to a pilot program for San Martín, an additional 27 million pesos were added in a second agreement between both entities. It was at this point that new municipalities entered the financial scheme initially tested in San Martín (Tigre, Gualeguaychú, Marcos Paz, Avellaneda – Santa Fe –, and Coronel Pringles are to be highlighted). The approval for the entry of these municipalities into the financial scheme was based on the assessment made by the federations of involved cooperatives regarding: i) the administrative capacity and technical orientation of local governments (involved in articulating their demands with cooperative providers); ii) the productive, commercial, and logistical capacity of the cooperatives associated with the federations in each particular territory and their connection with local government (personal interviews, 06/02/2022 and 10/06/2022). Once again, it's emphasized that in municipalities with a stronger tradition of supporting the sector, being part of the Network becomes a tool for urban management (providing new financing opportunities to the solidarity economy) and also a place of competition for state resources by cooperatives.

Regarding repayment compliance, it's possible to highlight some difficulties that cooperatives face, which may hinder their ability to participate in local procurement. Challenges include maintaining documents in order: a lack of administrative capabilities to interpret and comply with legal, productive, banking, and accounting requirements and their updates; dependence on local power structures leading to a loss of autonomy or socio-organizational learning capacity for the entire associated group, etc. In response to this scenario, various local administrative instances within the governments that make up the *Red de Municipios Cooperativos* are implementing initiatives to provide advice and support to cooperatives, ensuring that their documentation is in order (personal interviews, 06/02/2022; 06/07/2022).

In this quest to improve the applicability of local procurement, emphasis is placed on equipping cooperatives with the capacity to understand the readability of procedures requested by municipalities. Training strategies, rather than focusing on imparting "technical know-how" to cooperatives, should concentrate on recognizing aspects in which they lack acquired knowledge, spanning from marketing and cooperative marketing strategies, cost management and calculation, to the generation and systematization of information to qualify as eligible entities for local procurement mechanisms – such as biddings and tenders.

One strategy could be the one established by the municipality of San Martín, offering courses that typically do not exceed five sessions (to reduce the likelihood of dropout, requiring only strictly necessary time), accompanied by some quick reading materials designed by the same technical team. The pedagogy it employs is centered on collaborative learning and includes certificates of attendance and participation to provide recognition to participants, often individuals who did not complete their formal education. This, in part, can be considered from one of the perspectives of new municipalism – the one that understands the common in relation to the link between state bureaucracy and associative experiences – as a way to bridge the gap between both spheres.

At this point, it should be clarified that these initiatives are primarily registered in municipalities that have a more dense, proactive, and/or attentive administrative structure to the demands of the cooperative sector. An example of this is also the case of San Martín, where the recognition of the heterogeneity of experiences in the sector has a key instrument for its identification and management: *Registro de Empresas Sociales y Cooperativas* (the Registry of Social and Cooperative Enterprises) (personal interview, 06/03/2022). This is crucial for articulating municipal demands with the effective identification of the diversity of associative initiatives that can emerge as providers of local management and the products and services they offer, thus becoming an important agent for urban management according to their dedicated activity[7].

In this sense, the second agreement between Cooperar and INAES establishes a percentage of it to be allocated for the training of municipal teams, in order to introduce those local governments interested in integrating the Network to the specific knowledge involved in the connection with the cooperative sector, both in administrative, legal, and commercial aspects. The component is funded with resources from the municipalities themselves, in order to allocate the financing solely to the requirements of local procurement through the establishment of a revolving fund. INAES, on the other hand, provides a team of trainers to impart technical training on central legal aspects, such as the scope and potential of Resolution 1000/2021 of said organization, which establishes mechanisms for automatic simplification of procedures and exemption from formal requirements for cooperatives based on a segmentation according to their total annual sales. INAES's involvement can be seen as a leap to the national scale, but the intervention of the organization also implies the strengthening of various local governments by providing tools, technical team, and financing from a national entity.

[7] Here it is important to differentiate local management, identified with the interventions of municipalities, from urban management, in which economically relevant agents at the local scale can be incorporated.

THE SUSTAINABILITY OF THE NETWORK

Regarding the sustainability of local procurement policies, among the individuals contacted (personal interviews, June 2nd and 10th, 2022), there is consensus in understanding that the functioning does not solely depend on the mere existence of municipal administrative capacity and the responsiveness of cooperatives to local demands. Indeed, they also agree that it must be clear that the future of the revolving fund depends on the collaboration of both parties, their commitment beyond specific circumstances, and prior knowledge. This, in turn, is built on pre-existing bonds of trust (which also endure over time) to create a scenario of local urban management through tools that can be interpreted as community governance.

Concerning the bonds of trust, it is crucial that both Fecootra and Conarcoop participate in the tool because, as federations, they act as representatives of the interests of the associated cooperatives. In this sense, the funds belong to the cooperatives, even though INAES determines their destination with the designed scheme and the municipalities co-administer them without making financial decisions. Based on the above, one can observe in this revolving fund scheme a dynamic of co-responsibility: municipal technicians must recognize their limitations and commit to the tool. Meanwhile, those working in a municipality of the Network must ensure that the demand translates into a purchase, and the agreed-upon work is carried out to address management problems transparently. Those representing each cooperative must commit to complying with the agreed terms to continue integrating the portfolio of offering cooperatives, financing the fund, and thus enabling its rotation.

The heterogeneity in the origins and trajectories of cooperatives is also a factor to consider when incorporating them into local procurement: municipal teams must understand the timelines involved in cooperative formation, as underestimating this aspect can lead to promoting or supporting a project without the necessary maturation to build socio-economic sustainability that goes beyond local procurement instances.

In the associative sector, trust becomes valuable when relationships based on confidence are established, promoting the management of the common in terms of community governance and a mutual understanding between state bureaucracy and the associative sector. However, this trust is also based on fulfilling commitments, on the materialization of agreements. In this line, the fragility of technical teams – often employed under forms of temporary contracts – to transcend electoral circumstances with relative stability and fair remuneration can undermine the stability and institutional learning of the Network. Here, it is necessary to positively value the existence of institutional activists within technical teams, as they often drive sectors of local government to continue certain policies of their interest.

In the context of public policies, it is crucial, on one hand, to transcend views that exclusively link the solidarity economy with assistance to vulnerable populations or as a tool to mitigate social emergencies. On the other hand, it is important to deconstruct the prejudices of government officials and bureaucracy in the state sphere that associate worker cooperativism with labor fraud or mutualism with financial businesses.

In this framework, the advantages of conceiving and strengthening a network scheme are inseparable from training and education to connect the state sphere with the cooperative one. It is noteworthy that in municipalities where the government officials do not have highly trained technical teams in the subject, instances of capacity exchange have been recorded. For instance, San Martín provided its technical capabilities for the evaluation of two local procurement projects in the districts of Tigre and Gualeguaychú, with the aim that, in the future, those municipalities can replicate the experience autonomously.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, it is essential to emphasize the importance of analyzing experiences like the one presented in the context in which they unfold: the connection between the municipal and cooperative spheres does not unfold in an ideal or static scenario. Additionally, as the local scale is also influenced by regional and national circumstances, the emergence and strengthening of programs that operate at the municipal level and articulate different municipalities in the country can be seen as a way to generate autonomy from the political decisions of higher-level government entities. Furthermore, this initiative stands as a way to consolidate networks of work at both inter and intra municipal levels, strengthening ties with local associative actors, and can be interpreted as a form of managing the common both through community governance and collective action.

The *Red de Municipios Cooperativos* can also be viewed as a strategy to generate employment through the decentralization of the local procurement tool and, in the future, constitute a way to harness the economies of scale and the comparative advantages offered by each region of the country. Thus, municipalities could source products and services not generated in their territory through collaboration with other associative experiences via the Network.

By reflecting on the experience of the *Red de Municipios Cooperativos*, there is an emphasis on the need to consider sustainability – following Muñoz (2022) – not only regarding the subjects of public policies but also the sustainability of the policies themselves and the relationship between the two. In this connection, it is crucial not to depend solely on political figures or the technical team working in the local government.

In this sense, it is about generating, sustaining, and disseminating institutional instances that prioritize the management of the common, whether through a network of municipalities or within each of them. The common transcends the sphere of the state, although an articulation between organized community and local government can enhance the capacity to address citizen demands. In this direction, local procurement not only involves meeting a demand for the acquisition of a good or service by a municipality. Indeed, it is a strategy that assesses and strengthens the capacity for managing the common in urban areas.

For future research, there is an open reflection on the Network as a strategy for democratizing public policy, as it was, in part, a popular demand from federations and confederations to create a financing program with a structure that can be replicated in other territories. Equally relevant is the ongoing study of this public policy in its evolution and how the link between municipalities continues to solidify, particularly the relationship with recently incorporated municipalities into the Network. In this regard, the potential of a networked policy device suggests an impact on the sustainability and formalization of urban employment.

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DATA AVAILABILITY

The entire dataset supporting the results of this study is available upon request to the corresponding author (Ariel Oscar García). The dataset is not publicly available due to key informant interviews.

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