What does the 'Co-operative Difference' mean in a developing country context? The case of Cooperative Business Network of agricultural cooperatives in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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Abstract

Contrary to what some would suggest, cooperatives are enterprises that are not only compatible with a market economy but can thrive in an open market environment both in terms of their economic and social impact on communities. However, the literature tends to show this compatibility through excessive comparisons of cooperative economic functions and financial performance with similar aspects of Investor-owned firms (IOFs). While valuable such a focus threats to dislocate the actual source of the 'cooperative difference' and reduce it only to those aspects of cooperative enterprises that are comparable to IOFs. This paper argues that the source of the cooperative difference can be associated precisely with characteristics of cooperatives that have to do with their social and community building aspects, characteristics not to be found within the IOF structure. Secondly, the paper argues that the essence of the 'cooperative difference' may also be lost in part due to different interpretations and applications of cooperative values and principles by cooperatives in developed and developing countries leading to the existence of cooperative enterprises that hardly reflect any of the cooperative values. Such a partial understanding of values as represented by the ICA 1995 seven principles of cooperation seems to be especially problematic for countries with socialist background mostly due to connotations that cooperatives acquired during the socialist times. The case of the Cooperative Business Network of agricultural cooperatives in Bosnia and Herzegovina will be used to illustrate the meaning of cooperation and cooperative difference in a post-socialist, post-conflict setting.

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(1) Introduction

Cooperative enterprises have been around both in human practice and economic theory for more than a century. Beside markets and firms, they have served as yet another mechanism for coordinating economic activities among different agents with the aim of improving not just their economic power but also their overall wellbeing. The coordinating role of cooperatives is especially appealing for agricultural markets composed of small family farms for reasons related to the risky nature of farming as economic activity and nature of family farm as a production unit and its ability to surpass the monitoring issues in a cooperative context (Valentinov, 2005; 2007). However, despite the fact that cooperatives have for many years formed an economic and social fibre of societies, the forms in which they have emerged both through history and across different countries are sometimes in stark difference to widely proclaimed and well-known principles that underlie and define this organizational form. Why cooperatives at times find it hard to practice the preached principles of cooperation?

One way to answer this question and understand the importance of the evolutionary journey of cooperatives for their identity is to take into account the following points:

a) Although cooperatives function and compete in the same environment as other mechanisms that coordinate economic activities (i.e. markets and firms), their performance and success need to be viewed with full understanding of their nature, and

b) The way in which socio-political experiences of a particular country or region encroach on the very meaning of cooperation formalized through cooperatives can have long lasting consequences on the (self)perception of a cooperative sector.

Although vast literature discusses the uniqueness of cooperative enterprises by stressing their dual goal of economic and social kind, their success is often not measured on both those counts. Rather, cooperatives tend to be judged on how well they perform economically. In other words, their worth and viability are viewed and estimated through indicators that constitute the measure of success for an entity of different nature, namely an investor-owned firm (IOF). More often than not, *mainstream economics tends to compare cooperatives and IOFs using the same criteria thus reducing the essence of a cooperative enterprise to just its economic function.* This is especially true for agricultural cooperatives. Such an approach not only disregards the very source of 'cooperative difference' located precisely in their ability to tackle social and community development in sustainable manner but makes it very hard to argue in support of creating more cooperatives in our economic environment simply because the 'cooperative difference' as such is not appreciated enough neither in literature nor in practice. Instead, those aspects of cooperatives that address social and community needs are almost understood to be on the cost side of cooperative functioning

and are often seen to bring down the measurable performance levels. Though cooperatives sometimes even outperform their investor-owned counterparts, the reality is that they often either represent a minor share of the overall market or tend to either disappear from the market as a result of economic failure or transform into a conventional enterprise for a variety of reasons (Ben-Ner, 1988). It is no surprise then, as correctly pointed out by Zamagni, that sceptic view of cooperatives becomes preponderant in the literature and questions regarding the very existence of cooperatives in the market economy are no longer just rhetorical queries but serve to suggest that 'only capitalist firms are compatible with a market economy' (Zamagni, 2001:77). We will strive to shaw that the tendency to view cooperatives as incompatible with market economy is not only mistaken but it is distorting.

The instances of economic failure of cooperatives, as argued by Zamagni and Zamagni (2010), can be most simply explained by a lack of balance between social and economic role of cooperatives. Whenever one of these two dimensions becomes dominant, they contend, cooperatives tend to deviate from their true identity. The success of cooperatives, on the other hand, is rarely attributed to the organic nature of this enterprise but tends to be explained through the influence of exogenous factors such as easy market entry, special tax reductions, political support through positive legislation, and direct subsidies to sustain them in the market, to name a few. All the while, cases of failure of cooperatives to achieve economic efficiency by mainstream economics standards is ascribed to their organizational and governance inefficiencies, their inability to effectively tackle problems related to free riding, inefficient monitoring of productive activities, their inherent horizon and portfolio issues. Ben-Ner and Ellman (2013), who studied worker cooperatives, explain that inefficiency in cooperatives can at times arise because of a mismatch between the types of personalities of those forming and running a cooperative and a general aim of cooperative itself. Although their research concerns worker cooperatives this particular finding has some merit in explaining the importance of the 'human element' in triggering and sustaining the success or lack thereof in other types of cooperatives as well. Using the example of a number of BiH agricultural cooperatives, this paper will emphasize just how critical is the connection between cooperative members and its success. As it will be shown in the case study, cooperative leadership at times almost privatizes the cooperative enterprise and individually makes decisions that could in the long run prove to be detrimental to development of cooperative.

Reducing what is essentially a multidimensional entity to just one of its functions contributes greatly to creating a somewhat blurred view of cooperative identity. Emphasizing the potential of cooperatives to strengthen social ties while creating economic impact in their community is especially important in countries in which cooperatives were under heavy influence of state structures. Indeed, there is an increasing need to look into whether the understanding of basic cooperative principles in developing countries coincides with what cooperatives mean in developed countries, and what they should mean as reflected in the International Cooperative Alliance's seven principles of cooperation (1995). *The application of the ICA seven principles, especially as concerns the social and community role of coops, is particularly problematic in post-socialist countries due to connotations that cooperatives acquired during the socialist times.* The literature has neglected the fact that cooperatives in post-socialist countries may face an identity crisis with repercussions on both their economic and social performance. Consequently, cooperatives may end up battling the reputation they inherited from the former regime, doubting their ability to perform in a newly

introduced market economy, and fighting the perception public sector holds of them as highly inefficient enterprises. While cooperatives thrive in many developed countries and are found to be greatly contributing to many countries' GDP (ICA, 2012), the market position of cooperatives and their general appeal for farmers in post-socialist countries is far from desired. The success of cooperatives in developed countries can at least partly be attributed to the institutional features creating an environment conducive for development of cooperatives. However, a widespread institutional support for cooperatives alone is not a guarantor of their increased numbers, stronger market position or better functionality. Cooperatives and their identity neither originate in nor are reinforced through favourable legislation. First and foremost, cooperation presupposes existence of trust. And not just any kind of trust, but trust based on expected reciprocity between actors. Naturally, one would expect cooperatives to arise as grass root organizations expressing needs that emerge as a result of one's inability to achieve economic and social objectives in isolation from one's community. In case of agricultural cooperatives, which will be addressed in greater detail in this paper, a justification for forming a cooperative stems from the very nature of family-farm based economic activity with family unit representing the main locus of the trust necessary to build upon it wider network of cooperation. Good cooperation requires a good society, which 'is made of good acts, not only of productive actions and pleasurable gestures, it is made of good social relations not only of profitable exchanges; and it is made of good people and not only of satisfied ones' (Zamagni, 2001:78).

The change from one socio-political and economic system to another in the former Yugoslav space was so abrupt and violent that it left societies emptied of any kind of trust, let alone trust necessary to build and sustain ties of cooperation. The consequences of this change are still most vividly evident in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which in the aftermath of a four-year long war was a shattered society where cooperation among different ethnic groups has been an exception rather than a rule. Being a predominantly rural country with a considerable percentage of rural and poor population, its farmers are well used to conducting their economic activities through a medium of cooperative. Indeed, a cooperative form was not alien to socialist economic system as practiced in former Yugoslavia. However, most of cooperatives that had been created during the socialist times were under strict state guidance and those cooperatives that emerged in the aftermath of the 1995 war, with few notable exceptions, very much resemble the old style traditional cooperatives. Additionally, the new economic system also inspired some deviant forms of cooperatives that are locally known as 'family cooperatives', entities limited in their reach, membership and influence on the community.

There are federated structures that formally unite cooperatives in BiH, but there is no cooperative movement per se. There are cooperatives, but there is no cooperative spirit among cooperative members and leaders. Individuals who are elected or emerge as cooperative directors and leaders only rarely behave as representatives of cooperative members. The quality of democracy in cooperative sector seems to match the quality of democracy in the country: only formal and in short supply of actual democratic substance. While there are economic and social arguments in support of using cooperative structures in agriculture of BiH as a way of advancing development of rural areas, very little has been done on creating institutional framework that would favour development of cooperative structures. Still undergoing a dual transition, both from war and socialism, BiH institutional context never allowed new economic space to appear, and old organizational forms as

well as old habits took root. The case study of the Cooperative Business Network of agricultural cooperatives in BiH serves to illustrate the gravity of the problem at hand.

This paper will reflect upon at least two tendencies that most notably contribute to losing the sight of the importance of 'cooperative difference' for overall cooperative identity and uniqueness. Firstly, in Section 2 the paper will analyze how using the same instruments to compare the performance of cooperatives and IOFs can create an image of cooperatives as economically inefficient enterprises thus reducing the importance of other cooperative functions. Secondly, in Section 3 the paper will argue that the existence of incongruity between basic ICA principles of cooperation and what is being applied in cooperative enterprises in post-socialist countries further reinforces the image of cooperatives as utterly state-subsidy dependent organizations. The case study in Section 4 will illustrate the main arguments of the paper. Section 5 is a concluding one.

(2) The 'cooperative difference': Asset or Liability?

Cooperatives are known to be a specific kind of entrepreneurial entity, different from a conventional corporation. Though often cited, the 'cooperative difference' is rarely qualified as cooperative asset in the literature. Instead, it is reduced to a side issue whose legitimacy is challenged on the grounds of its lack of measurability. As a consequence, the peculiarities of cooperative enterprise are sought in those measurable and immediately visible aspects of cooperative work that make up only a part of the complex network of human interaction cooperatives embody within their organization. It is no wonder then that most commonly the economics literature defines the cooperative specificities in relation to the characteristics of investor-owned firms (IOFs) thus judging their performance levels in a rather reduced context. Only when the gap in performance between cooperatives and corporations is established, the 'cooperative difference' is called upon to account for lack of economic efficiency in cooperative enterprise. This approach can be partly legitimate because of a rather common belief that "in the absence of government intervention, large-scale enterprise will be organized in a form of investor-owned firms" (Hansmann, 2000:1). Consequently and due to this understanding that the only feasible alternative to state-ownership is private ownership in the strict sense, authors who write on cooperatives find themselves in need to explain just how alternative cooperative enterprises are to IOFs and how this alternative is indeed a viable solution to many instances of market or government failure. Inevitably, the result of such discourse is overly emphasized ownership and governance aspects of cooperative enterprises in the literature, so much so that other aspects that make up cooperative identity and may be of at least equal if not bigger importance end up being largely forsaken by the literature (Novkovic, 2008). Thus, the comparison between cooperatives and IOFs almost always boils down to evaluating the economic performance of cooperatives and IOFs, i.e. how well they perform in creating economic benefits for their members and shareholders respectively.

The discussion on how to improve cooperative performance then naturally goes in the direction of suggesting alterations to cooperatives the end result of which very much resembles the IOFs' structure. So, to ameliorate various agency and horizon problems, as well as often cited undercapitalization concerns, which are considered to be the most prominent challenges to

cooperatives' economic performance, the literature suggests that they can engage in an exercise of organizational innovation and move away from limiting traditional type of cooperative to anywhere from allowing external investor into the structure as a member to being a real investor-owned firm at which point they cease to be cooperatives (Chaddad and Cook, 2004). Of course, there are authors who suggest that there is no need to stream towards achieving too much of similarity with IOFs and that cooperatives, with their structure and 'not-for profit' orientation, promise not only to fill the gap that emerges as a result of various market and government failures but also to go beyond simply fixing the market failure and venture into satisfying a variety of social needs (Borzaga and Defourny, 2004; Evers and Laville, 2004). The superiority of cooperatives over IOFs in agricultural sector, for example, has been well documented through studies that show that cooperatives indeed have the ability to reduce otherwise prohibitively high transaction costs and are most certainly able to improve production processes in fragmented agricultural markets dominated by small holders (Valentinov, 2005, 2007; Tortia et al, 2013).

In assessing how the neglect of the 'cooperative difference' in the literature my lead to a distorted view of cooperative identity one would naturally turn to an agreed upon definition of cooperative for some guidance. However, there is more than one view on defining features of cooperatives and what differentiates them from corporations. In his work on cooperatives Van Dooren (1978; 1982) documented the existence of more than twenty different definitions of cooperatives covering more than forty divergent areas of their functioning. Not much has changed from then until now in terms of scholars' attempt and failure to generate a single, succinct definition of cooperative. On the contrary, in the years that followed Van Dooren's analysis new socio-economic conditions have given birth to innovative cooperative forms especially in the countries that broke away from socialist economic tradition in the 1990s and, faced with market competitiveness, had to reconcile their previous mode of functioning with sophisticated demands of the market. Along with the cooperative models that emerged in countries with socialist past, new generation cooperatives emerged in the USA as a response to an ever increasing competitive pressure from the market (Harris et al, 1996). However, this in itself need not be a problem. In fact, most of the literature on cooperatives, and in agriculture in particular, acknowledges advantageous aspects of heterogeneity of interpretations and views on the definition of cooperatives, specifically singling out their role in providing for a long term rural development based on strong social ties (Koller, 1947; Van Dooren, 1978; Hansmann, 1980; Staatz, 1987; Centner, 1988; Barton, 1989; Hind, 1997; Chaddad and Cook, 2004). Indeed, the heterogeneity of views with regards to this specific organizational form itself does not in any way constitute a credible threat to its specific and special nature. Admittedly, the existence of a multitude of definitions is not simply an illustration of scholarly disagreement on what cooperatives are or should be in the context of globalized and intertwined economies but it is more a testimonial to the complexity of the phenomenon in question. The presence of very many definitions is insightful, however, of "capacity of cooperatives to assume a number of forms consistent with socio-economic environment in which they are situated" (Borzaga and Spear, 2004:3). But when these forms are not consistent with the very principles cooperatives pride themselves on, then there is reason for concern. Additionally, the tendencies to reduce the cooperative special nature to simply showing that cooperatives too are able to perform economic functions equally well or sometimes even better than their IOFs counterparts is worrisome.

The obvious downside to having no single and stable definition of cooperative is, for one thing, the ability of every individual author depending on his/her subject of study to select among many cooperative features the ones he/she sees as most important which, for example, happens when cooperatives' performance is compared to IOFs. In this pick and choose approach some aspects of cooperatives are bound to be left out or at least understudied. For example, defining a cooperative as essentially a not-for-profit enterprise may have different interpretations in developed and developing country context. While in a developed country setting this may mean that no one would be able to appropriate the earnings attained through cooperative and that cooperative has priorities other than simple profit-making, in a developing country context it might suggest that no earning will be available at all. The 'not-for-profit' connotation in a country that has only recently been introduced to an open market economy where profit is a preponderant measure of success and would imply an unsuccessful organizational endeavour.

Two questions appear relevant from the presence of the heterogeneity of views on cooperatives and their features. Firstly, what really constitutes the co-operative difference? And secondly, assuming that there is a common denominator for cooperative identity and that 'cooperative difference' is its part is this identity context-proof? In other words, is there any difference in how basic cooperative principles that make up cooperative identity are interpreted in a developed and developing country context?

2.1 What constitutes the cooperative difference?

As regards the first question, some authors perceive democratic processes of decision making as an important underlying feature that characterizes cooperatives as business entities which allow active participation of every member in deciding upon the management structure of his/her cooperative as well as its business decisions, especially the long term ones (Centner, 1988). Others single out the importance of their member-user orientation and their ability to use their internal coordinating structure to provide economic and social benefits to their members (Koller, 1947; Chayanov, 1991). Staatz (1987) views agricultural cooperatives as indispensable mechanism for reducing risks due to high asset specificity in certain agricultural sectors, and a way of reducing production and transaction costs. Additionally, the transaction cost approach as epitomized in the writings of Coase, Williamson, Staatz, Ouchi, and others focuses on how cooperatives mitigate strictly market related expenses. However, transaction costs approach does as well venture into exploring how cooperatives can be used as bargaining and lobbying instrument where farmers need protecting from those who tend to defect on contracts, and indeed for establishing better relations with political and policy making bodies (Staatz, 1987: 89-90). This role of cooperatives has been unknown to some countries, especially those with socialist heritage.

Cooperative enterprises are indeed recognized as special kind of firms "known to possess a dual character; on the one hand they are businesses driven by economic incentives, while on the other, they are associations with a social purpose and character" (Novkovic, 2012: 289). Cooperatives are sometimes also defined by what they are not. And they are not profit seeking entities. Due to lack of clarity as to how best to quantify the efficiency of an enterprise that integrates economic and social objectives, and overwhelming prevalence of neoclassical tools for defining efficiency of enterprises

the critics often highlight that cooperatives are incapable of achieving either process or product efficiency as they are burdened with many individual members' interests that at the end of the day prove impossible to coordinate. This results in cooperatives being able to achieve neither fully economic nor fully social purpose. Instead, they often lag behind IOFs and if they wish to remain competitive they have to end up replicating some of the IOFs features (Ben-Ner, 1984). When viewed from a neoclassical economics perspective, keeping in mind the profit as ultimate aim, economic and social nature as integrated in a cooperative firm seem to be mutually exclusive. Thus, it appears that in the eyes of neoclassical economists the aspiration to achieving both inevitably leads to falling short in achieving the maximum of either. An optimum combination of both does not, in this view, constitute efficiency. This is partly the reason why cooperative firms have been regarded as less efficient compared to IOFs in the same industry. Following from this view is the idea that social and community oriented aspects of cooperatives coupled with lack of hierarchical order are a source of their inefficiency.

The many misconceptions often attached to the idea of a cooperative firm thus rest on a fallacy of assuming not that cooperatives and IOFs have different objectives, which is often acknowledged, but that these objectives are same in number. While IOFs strive to reach one single goal – the profit for the shareholders, a multiplicity of purpose is attached to cooperative firms. Being defined as entities that at the same time seek to fulfil a multitude of objectives, the measure of their efficiency as well as indicators of their organizational difference must be reconceptualized in a manner that acknowledges the responsibilities of cooperatives towards their members, towards other cooperatives and towards the communities in which they exist. Contrary to cooperatives, IOFs are responsible to their shareholders alone. An example of corporate social responsibility may be a useful way to illustrate the point. While corporate social responsibility in IOFs' business policy is more often an exception than a rule, the same principle is an integral part of cooperative business idea and of cooperative identity for that matter. Indeed, it can be observed as cooperatives' strategic advantage in comparison to IOFs.

Table 1. Main differences between IOFs and COOPs

IOFs	Comparisons in terms of:	COOPs
Profit of shareholders	**Short term motivation**	Profit of members Social cohesion Networking Market consolidation
Hierarchical	**Organization**	Democratic
Owners and management may differ	**Governance**	Members are owners
Protecting the interest of shareholders	**Long term purpose**	Protecting the interests of all members Development of community

It is visible from the table above that IOFs focus mainly on achieving what is immediately visible, i.e. profits of the shareholders. This is can only be comparable to the short term goal of cooperatives to secure economic benefits to their members. However, in the long run cooperatives aim to strengthen the market position of their members/owners and add to the well being of the community as a whole. While owners and management differ in IOFs, they are the same for the

cooperative. In both, owners choose management but in cooperatives management is chosen among the owners and shares equally with all members both success and failure of cooperative. In IOFs management works for its own benefit, but ultimately the greatest percentage of the benefit goes to the owners. In cases of failures of IOFs, the burden is born by the workers either through reduced salaries or through lay-offs. Clearly, cooperatives offer benefits to their members that are simply not part of the IOF organizational philosophy and structure. This is where real 'cooperative difference' needs to be sought.

When cooperatives and IOFs are compared in how well they meet their stated objectives it becomes clear that efficiency in case of cooperatives and IOFs does not mean the same thing. It is only reasonable to assume that an optimum combination of various purposes that may be peculiar to each and every cooperative would then define whether that particular cooperative is successful or not, and studying this optimum combination of objectives would add value to clarifying exactly what stands behind the 'cooperative difference'. This reality is certainly not satisfactory in terms of our ability to deduce general assumptions regarding the measurements of cooperatives' efficiency that would qualify as a genuine value added to the theory of cooperatives. However, it must be acknowledged. Notwithstanding their internal differences rooted either in different values or different understanding of enterprises' purpose, one thing remains in common to all forms of governance and that is the external institutional environment in which they are formed and in which they function. This as well has to do with how 'cooperative difference' is practiced among actual cooperatives and how it is interpreted in **developed vs. developing country** (???) context.

2.2 Are cooperative identity and 'cooperative difference' context-proof?

For larger part of modern human history, economics as a science has focused on studying markets and hierarchies as only viable coordination mechanisms, and exchange among individuals as only acceptable logic of their rational behaviour. It is only recently that the field was altered to acknowledge the existence of a host of so called hybrid organizational forms that fall in neither one of these two categories (Menard, 2004) and to add to its study of extrinsic motivations the intrinsic ones as important explanatory factor of human behaviour. While it could be said that the logic of exchange still underlies actors' interactions through markets and hierarchies, studying those organizational forms that fall in neither markets nor hierarchies and which also reflect the intrinsic motivations of actors would need to include much more than simple exchange – there is a need to move towards the logic of reciprocity (Zamagni, 2008: 13-19).

The relation of reciprocity is instrumental for cooperatives and in their case it takes 'the specific form of mutuality' (Zamagni, 2001: 78). In fact, it could be said that it is one of the backbones of the entire idea of cooperation. Yet, it is seldom found in definitions of cooperatives of any kind. It is merely implied in a form of expectation that reciprocal relations could result from an enterprise that is jointly owned and democratically controlled by the same group of people, an implication stemming from the ICA 1995 Statement on Cooperative Identity that in full reads:

> A co-operative is an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise.

The definition is further substantiated by a list of seven cooperative principles which are a bit more explicit about relational side of cooperatives and indeed do sum up the essence of the cooperative identity. Out of seven principles of cooperation, 'guidelines by which co-operatives put their values into practice' only one, the third principle, refers directly to economic participation of members. The rest of them tackle issues of governance including how to exercise the rights through cooperative governance structures, and the last three principles are almost entirely focused on what literature calls the intangible benefits of cooperation. Though the 'cooperative difference' extends through all seven principles, it is most visible in the ones that address long term oriented needs of individual members and their community. Two principles central to this paper are as follows:

> Co-operation among Co-operatives: Co-operatives serve their members most effectively and strengthen the co-operative movement by working together through local, national, regional and international structures.
> Concern for Community: Co-operatives work for the sustainable development of their communities through policies approved by their members (ICA, 1995).

Relationship among the IOFs in a market is one of competition, especially if they are in the same industry. Befitting their for-profit orientation investor-owned firms do not mind functioning in a monopolistic market and reaping the monetary benefits of such condition. Cooperation among IOFs happens in as much as it advances their individual interests. It would be erroneous to say that there exists no competitive relationship among cooperatives in a marketplace. However, the form of competition that exists is closely related to the very cooperative idea of supporting competitive behaviour through strengthening not only one's cooperative but other cooperatives as well. Cooperatives tend to do so by forming all kinds of specialized consortia and federated structures. These structures can take a cooperative form themselves but even if they do not, they are essentially independent entities and benefits provided through them would usually qualify as intangible ones. In addition to providing direct benefits to their members through joint branding and marketing for example, in their own way federated structures assist development of cooperatives sectors in their countries. In Italy for example, cooperatives are obliged by the law to allocate 3% of their net annual profit to a fund aimed at helping general development of cooperatives, the so called 'system mutuality'. Apart from internal mutuality of members towards one another, cooperatives are said to be characterized by a set of other principles namely the external mutuality, intergenerational solidarity and intercooperative solidarity (Thomas, 2004). In this way, the specificities of cooperative form are not only contained within the boundaries of the organization itself but are to be found in relationships the organization fosters with other actors, specifically other cooperatives. This outward orientation positions them as hubs of economic and social activities in their respective communities. One of the cooperative principles is to enable healthy competition in the market which is why the argument about incompatibility of cooperative form with a market economy simply does not stand.

Apart from the ICA 1995 values and principles the 'cooperative difference' has been recognized by other internationally important actors as well. In 2001, the United Nations General Assembly issued a list of guidelines aimed at identifying elements of a supportive environment for the development of cooperatives. The document reinstated governments' views of cooperatives "as associations and enterprises through which citizens can effectively improve their lives while also contributing to the

economic, social, cultural, and political advancement of their community and nation" (UN Guidelines, 2001:3). This valuable document further recognized the specificity of a cooperative form of business, seeking from governments to establish institutional environment and policy context in which cooperatives would not be discriminated against on the grounds of their specificities and which could serve as a backdrop against which cooperative form could actually fulfil its economic and social potential.

The document also underlies that development of cooperatives as well as their functionality depend very much on the institutional and policy context in which they exist.

In analyzing and comparing the determinants of success or failure of both cooperative firms and IOFs, the effect of institutional environment on cooperative efficiency is often taken for granted and not calculated into the efficiency equation. This can partly be ascribed to the fact that scholars themselves still have problems defining the true substance of institutions and forms they can take. And also because in highly developed countries, matters of institutional and especially legal insecurity are not part of cooperative environment and that allows for greater attention to be devoted to debating and understanding cooperative principles as such, a luxury not found in many developing countries. Instead, developing and post-socialist countries have decades of historical memory imprinted on cooperative idea and their moving towards self-sustainable model of cooperative business would require a long and possibly painful process of institutional and organizational restructuring.

The case of former Yugoslavia and its many agricultural reforms serves as a useful example of how an idea can be degenerated to the point that it deviates from its original nature. For better understanding of what cooperatives came to mean in the post-Yugoslav space it is helpful to look into the basic historical highlights of cooperative movement and agrarian reforms in former Yugoslavia, particularly in the aftermath of the World War II (WWII). Development of cooperatives and cooperative idea was never a purely economic question in Yugoslavia. It sprung from being enthusiastically embraced by many small farmers throughout the country to being completely denounced by those same farmers because it turned into an instrument of state control. For years 'agrarian question' was both political and politicized because it usually involved great land ownership restructuring as well as matters of considerable demographic movements. Various political constellations and power shifting in Yugoslavia itself and regionally in the period from early 1920s until the WWII led to certain policy moves by political elite at the time which some authors went as far as to qualify as 'economic genocide' against a certain ethnic group (Imamović et al, 1993; Tanović, 1995), while others refrained from such qualifications and simply limited themselves to analyzing the economic and political consequences of newly introduced ownership structure (Kamberović, 2003). Either way, agrarian reforms are perhaps the most turbulent part of Yugoslav economic history and the way in which they affected cooperative idea and identity remained felt firstly in how farmers see the idea of cooperation and secondly how state structures came to understand it and behave towards it.

The first agrarian reform that would leave significant marks on the structure of agricultural sector and system of land ownership in BiH covered the period from 1919 to 1933 when BiH society as a whole "experienced deep transformations" (Bougarel, 2012:313). The reform was both extensive

and at times aggressive. Propagated as an attempt to restructure agriculture of Yugoslav states by replacing the feudalism with private land ownership granted to peasants, the reform drew its legitimacy from the proposition that small holders' farms are more efficient than large holdings (Živkov, 1976).

From the inter-war agrarian pursuance of reform through introduction of private property in the form of small farms rather than large land holdings, the immediate aftermath of the WWII saw yet another form of ownership system introduced. The period that followed the WWII witnessed a complete ideological shift in political and economic organizing and it had introduced a period of socialist rule and central planning that would, in its various forms, last until the final breakdown of the Yugoslavia in 1990s. The most important implications of the new regime type for the agricultural sector in general and cooperative organizational forms in particular, can be seen in yet another series of agricultural reforms.

There are two distinct phases in the new wave of agricultural reforms that were a direct result of Yugoslav-style socialism. Unlike the inter-war agricultural reforms whose implementation covered a span of more than twenty years, the reform that was initiated in 1945 was sharp and quickly executed. A number of restrictive measures were in place as soon as early 1950s and mainly targeted private property. In this way, much of the implications of the inter-war reforms were undone in a sense that private property became limited but unlike during the inter-war reforms when ownership over land was distributed differently between land owners and peasants as a result of the reforms, in the period from 1945 to 1950 the state was introduced as yet another owner of the land. Consequently, the structure of agriculture that emerged as a result of the post WWII reforms consisted of many small private farms and few large state owned farms (Gnjatović et al, 2012).

The basis for the reform was the Federal Law on agrarian reform and colonization of August 23, 1945 which stipulated the right of the state to confiscate the land from private owners, both farmers and non-farmers with no compensation. A threshold was established on the size of land plot that was allowed to be held in private property and was different for these two categories. According to the Law, non-farmers could have no more than three hectares of land in private ownership. For agricultural producers, on the other hand, any surplus property above 25 hectares of arable land and surplus above 45 hectares of land in total was expropriated and placed in a state run fund of agricultural land. By the time all reform measures had been implemented, the fund had around 1,611,867 hectares of land in its possession, of which 407,037 hectares were distributed among 263,000 poor families who desired to be agriculturally active but lacked resources. The rest of the fund was mainly used to create large state farms (Ibid.).

The second phase of agricultural reforms in the post WWII period was the phase of self-management. While the 1945 reform implied distribution of land to poor peasants who wanted to start agricultural production, in the later stages of the reform, more precisely from 1953 onwards, new restrictions on the amount of the land allowed in private property were imposed. In March of 1953, a new Law on farmland in social property and land allocation to agricultural organizations was legislated to regulate land distribution and ownership rights in the country. The law limited private property to not more than 10 hectares (Simonović, 1990). Underpinning principle upon which the

whole reform programme of the Communist party was built can be summarized in the following manner: 'only those who work on the land can own the land' (Maticka, 1982:290). What was previously known as state farms and state agricultural fund became social farms and social agricultural fund. Implementation of the 1953 law, and further limitation on the private property in land led to the social fund being enriched by additional 275.900 hectares of arable land that was confiscated from 66 459 households (Gnjatović et al, 2012). The land that was held in the social fund was given for a permanent use to organizations that were considered to be in social property, such as cooperatives. It was this social land used by cooperatives that created a host of legal problems after the breakup of Yugoslavia. The idea of a cooperative propagated by state structures in the 1950s was in contradiction to the very spirit of cooperation as we know it today. It was not uncommon that farmers were forced to join cooperatives and bring in their private property; cooperative leadership was selected by the state and from among those loyal to the state structures (Šoljić et al, 2005).

Through agricultural reforms implemented in these two phases, a very crucial right to private ownership of land as the most important resource in agricultural production was derogated to the point that very little economic strength was placed in hands of individual farmers. It is in this period in particular that agricultural cooperatives somehow assumed a set of negative connotations, being primarily associated with the *lack of land ownership rights* and *lack of economic power*. Cooperatives were somehow forced upon the rural dwellers as the sole form of economic organizing. The multitude of agricultural policies that ensued over the socialist years all seemed to have showed an alarming degree of incongruity, all aiming to achieve mass production in agriculture through collectivization of resources. Admittedly, the agricultural sector did receive more attention in the country's development strategy but the fact that central planning and merciless collectivization in agricultural sector served to limit the capacity of farmers to innovate and technologically improve their production point to the fact that the attention paid to agriculture was merely nominal and very state-centric. Furthermore, in the context of constant policy flux and pressure from the reforms in which farmers found themselves, it was neither possible to nurture any particular form of agricultural organization nor viable to develop workable and functional cooperative models that could survive all the policy changing shocks that came in the abundance during the socialist Yugoslavia.

The shift from a fully-fledged central planning system towards its more relaxed version of self-management in the 1950s and 1960s, brought yet another series of shocks on agriculture. Not used to the notion of market directed production, many organizational forms in agricultural sector simply faded away from the economic scene due to their inability to exhibit organizational flexibility in the face of new changes coming from the economic environment (Selak 2002). When central planning was replaced with social planning, already highly fragmented market for agricultural production finally faced a complete loss of confidence in its own productive capacities.

And well into the 1980s, agriculture was pushed off the priority agenda as other nationally fuelled issues had taken over the political and economic landscape of Yugoslavia. Its final disarray in the early 1990s will leave its six republics to battle with the underpinning values of the old system while searching for much needed flexibility in organizational forms and institutional architecture conducive to development of agricultural sector in a market based economy.

The current outlook of cooperative sector in BiH can be traced to the implications of many agrarian reform . First and foremost, the frequency of reforms left no room for farmers to understand their needs and act upon them. Cooperative idea needs to be nourished from within the group of those who need to see economic and communal purpose in it in order to pursue it. Although first cooperatives were formed in the countries of former Yugoslavia more than a century ago, in the post-WW II period the cooperative idea itself was instrumental to state structures in carrying out their many policies, policy of collectivization included. Consequently, the idea and organization that epitomized it came to be seen by farmers as alien, with state-ownership stamp on it, and essentially controlling rather than enabling.

Furthermore, farmers had very little say in how cooperatives were run, especially in the early 1950s when most of their private ownership was controlled by state structures. In such circumstances, cooperatives came to be characterized by obligatory as opposed to voluntary membership, by centralized as opposed to democratic decision-making and were economically and communally irrelevant instead of being economically and communally empowering. For farmers, cooperatives were means of mere survival rather than opportunity for development and modernization. For current state structures, cooperatives represent an instrument used by socialist state institutions to carry out its policies. Cooperatives were never given a chance as an instrument of development.

Although many things have changed with the introduction of a market economy, cooperatives still carry a stigma of economic inefficiency and general irrelevance to development. To be sure, the response from the cooperative sector itself has been rather unsatisfactory and did very little to reverse the karma, save for a few isolated cases. The successful cooperatives today are either very big old cooperatives (in terms of membership and employment impact on the community) or those formed with the help of international donors or development agencies.

General feeling of confusion as to what exactly constitutes the cooperative difference and identity present among BiH cooperatives, their increasing desire to focus solely on economic side of cooperation due to prevalence of belief that only profit means success, and a lack of interest of state structures in developing the cooperative model all contribute to cooperative sector in BiH currently being underdeveloped and far from desired.

There is a need to assess to what extend cooperatives in post-socialist and developing countries like BiH can denounce the historical heritage attached to the idea of collective action and cooperative business enterprise and embrace the ICA principles of cooperation. The example of BiH cooperative sector points to some challenges that are believed to be common to all countries in which cooperative idea was misused by state structures to introduce a set of sweeping reforms that were misligned with cooperative and agricultural development.

(3) The formidable institutional context of BiH agriculture: No place for cooperation?

Bosnia and Herzegovina. Up until it gained its independence in 1992, it was one of the six republics that constituted the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. To gain its independence BiH went

through a violent and destructive four-year long war which left dire consequences on its productive industries and in particular its agricultural sector. The war shattered the very fabric of Bosnia's heterogeneous society leaving the level of social trust among its ethnic groups at the very minimum.

It has been estimated that approximately 81% of BiH territory can be considered rural with around 61% of population residing in these areas. Majority of BiH rural population engages in some form of agricultural activity. According to the 1991 census, around 48% of BiH population reported to own some amount of agricultural land (Bogućanin et al, 2011). Small and inefficient farms represent one of the major challenges to development of rural areas in BiH. According to the USAID survey of agricultural holdings in BiH, average farm size ranges anywhere from 2 to 3 hectares (USAID, 2011). At the same time, the exact number of cooperatives is unknown since no institution in the country keeps the official records as regards various organizational forms in the sector and their productive capacities. There is no state level ministry of agriculture, and consequently no overarching agricultural vision or policy that applies to the whole country. Due to constitutional provisions agriculture is understood to be in the jurisdiction of lower levels of governance, namely Federation of BiH and Republika Srpska. This highly decentralized system of decision- and policy-making has created a rather hostile institutional environment in which no swift reforms could ever take place. While any government development oriented action is limited by its own systemic deficiencies, farmers on the other hand have expectations that very much resonate past regime experiences – a greater involvement of public sector in planning and supporting agricultural activities. Farmers do not wish to meet the market alone.

Such institutional and sectoral structure begs the question: How it is possible that such a market in agriculture populated by small, inefficient and often non-contiguous farm holdings did not motivate farmers to form more cooperatives on their own or improve the existing ones? What contributes to cooperatives having such a bad reputation in public policy making circles? That is, there is no clear agricultural cooperative model of development.

There are at least three distinct factors that have contributed to agricultural cooperatives in BiH being perceived as least efficient organizational form currently present in BiH agriculture. The first factor can be thought of as a nexus of historical processes that had guided the development process of cooperative sector in all republics of former Yugoslavia, including BiH. During this time cooperatives acquired a reputation of being state-sponsored and state-directed farmers' organizations. The second reason refers to the current policy environment within which cooperatives are expected to compete against the IOFs in agriculture without there being a clear recognition of their special nature. And thirdly, the very response by the cooperative sector to both its business and institutional environment has been rather flat, inflexible and reflective of the rigidity in internal ownership and governance structures, all potential signs that the previous model of cooperatives outlived the regime itself.

Although a wealth of literature deals with cooperatives' responses to the changes in their business environment describing various hybrid forms of cooperatives that emerge as a reaction to competitive pressures (Nilsson, 1999; Chaddad and Cook, 2004; Tortia et al, 2013), much of these analyses refer to the context of developed countries with institutional environment clearly recognizing the rights and obligations of cooperatives before the law and in relation to their for-

profit counterparts. Not much has been written on how developing countries that wish to stimulate rural development through cooperative enterprises deal with lack of institutional support that is oftentimes coupled with inadequate and inefficient internal cooperative structures. Furthermore, post socialist countries, like BiH, have a whole new set of issues to deal with that have to do with cooperative identity. Although the ICA principles of cooperatives were introduced several years after the break-up of Yugoslavia, they can be said to have been deduced from cooperative practices around the world. A recent study on the support to farmers' cooperatives in the EU suggests that apart from cooperatives' position in the value chain, their performance is very much influenced by present and past institutions (Bijman et al, 2012).

Regardless of whether cooperatives are of primary or secondary nature, in most of the European countries they are still regarded as one of the most important coordination mechanisms in agricultural and food industries (Perrot et al, 2001). This is precisely due to the fact that their role is not solely limited to servicing their members' economic needs but extends far beyond them in the realm of community development. Copa-COGECA (European farmers and European Agri-Cooperatives) estimates that currently there are more than 30.000 agricultural cooperatives registered all across Europe with some 9 million members, covering close to 60% of total EU agricultural output. It is not unusual for cooperatives in the EU countries to create second level cooperatives or consortia in an attempt to improve their final products and thus augment their market power. In other words, guided by the need to move away from the supply led production towards more demand led production (Kyriakopoulos i Van Bekkum, 1999), they engage in various kinds of organizational innovation while still observing the essential principles of cooperation.

In her analysis of cooperative performance indicators, Novkovic (2011) singles out cooperative organizational specificities as a source of their stability in increasingly volatile domestic and international markets. Among a variety of instruments greater stability can for sure be ensured through cooperation among cooperatives, a move that is not at all unusual as a safeguard against ever increasing competitive pressures. In developing and post-socialist country context where there is a need to redefine the meaning of cooperation and cooperative enterprises, the advocacy role of second level cooperatives can prove to be of essence in enabling cooperatives to achieve their economic and social potential.

(4) Cooperative Business Network – an idea that never materialized

Although there is no official statistics on number of cooperatives in BiH and their contribution to overall development some estimates suggest that there may be anywhere from 200 to 500 cooperatives in the entire territory of BiH. Most cooperatives that do exist and function in BiH are far from modern economic organizations that they are in many cooperatives throughout Europe. They could all benefit from capacity building and investments in human capital, improvement of productive capacities and marketing activities as their levels of technical capacity and old fashioned production processes are still very dominant. When these characteristics are coupled with idle land market limited by many property rights issues, the urgency of exploring all modes of organizational innovation that would modernize the production and contribute to strengthening the overall cooperative presence in the market becomes self-evident (Bogućanin et al, 2006).

Against this gloomy background the idea to form the Cooperative Business Network (CBN) was born and suggested to the Cooperative Association of BiH by 20 cooperative heads who were at the time its active members. The idea was presented to an external donor and the project of setting up the CBN was launched at the beginning of 2010. In 2012, in-depth interviews were conducted with 15 cooperative heads out of 20 who initially expressed interest to participate in the project to understand why, two years after it was initiated, project failed to be completed. The findings evidenced a deficiency in the understanding of cooperative principles and functions of federated structures.

The idea to self-organize either on primary or secondary level must be rooted in evident and clearly expressed needs. That is perhaps one of the basic preconditions for success of cooperation in general – the need must be organic and internally generated. Interestingly, the total number of cooperatives that expressed the interest to participate in the establishment of the CBN was rather small even if one takes the pessimistic scenario of only 200 agricultural cooperatives being functional. It was important to understand the nature of cooperatives that expressed the interest in the project as well as their motivation. Prior to conducting interviews with all of them, a questionnaire with semi-structured questions was distributed among them in order gauge some comparable information on cooperatives themselves. With the exception of two cooperatives which were production cooperatives, others were mainly engaged in getting farmers' input supplies and placing farmers' individual products on the market. None of them provided any training for their members, and only one engaged in common marketing activities for its members. When asked what was their motivation for wanting to form and join the CBN, three priorities arose, namely to help them *lobby with the government institutions*, to help them *develop processing and warehouse capacities*, and to help *reduce the administrative costs* they incur when trying to place their members' products on the market.

None of them perceived common marketing activities as something that could potentially help their market placement although marketing was clearly not provided through their present primary cooperative structures. Although the project initially envisaged the establishment of a credit line for members of the Network, cooperatives were very distrustful of that idea dismissing it outright as something that would certainly never work.

Without any exception, cooperative heads confirmed that it was the lack of trust that prevented them from finally engaging in setting up a Network. Also highly emphasized point was the fact that such a thing was never done before and there were many uncertainties about its internal structure and its financial feasibility once the donor funds phase out. Cooperative Association's representatives were also interviewed on their two-year experience trying to set up a Network that aimed to help cooperatives and would practically cost them nothing, confirmed that cooperative heads showed a lot of distrust towards one another throughout the process. Apparently, as the process of setting up a Network dragged on for two years at the time, they felt it was generally too risky to commit any resources to the idea especially because setting it up would not guarantee a definitive business success in an unstable environment. Furthermore, they all stated that they would not be ready to provide any resources for the functioning of the CBN (financial resources included) and that it should be entirely funded by some state agency once the donor grant is finished. This is a clear indicator that there is still a strong expectation among cooperatives in post-socialist setting

that government should stand behind something that could be entirely cooperative effort. It was also repeatedly highlighted that BiH's information poor environment made it very hard for them to search for business partners and they hoped that the CBN would help them in that regard.

Despite the fact that BiH agricultural market is relatively small and the number of cooperatives is most probably nowhere above 250, cooperatives seem to imagine their development trajectories as rather isolated from their cooperative counterparts. They fail to see the areas of mutual cooperation but rather view each other as competitors for government subsidies and other grants. This can partly be attributed to the lack of devotion to true cooperative principles and goes to show that majority of cooperatives that are active in BiH market put emphasis on their own 'collective profit seeking' behaviour at the expense of social and community-caring component which could have far greater impact on their immediate community.

Table 2. Obstacles to establishing a Cooperative Business Network in BiH

Obstacles	Detailed responses
Lack of proper institutions	Absence of state level ministry and vision for agricultural development; insecure and unreliable legal system; complex legislature and administrative procedures associated with establishing a new legal entity; lack of public sector support to cooperative consortia; ill-defined property rights system; no place for cooperatives in rural development strategies; improper implementation of current laws;
Lack of initiative and organizational flexibility of existing cooperatives	Lack of funding and human resources that could be devoted to the project; lack of good quality products worthwhile of common marketing through second level coop; lack of trust among cooperatives themselves; lack of interest to engage in innovative ways of raising capital for cooperatives; no secure market for placement of cooperatives' members products; unwillingness to take any risks
Market related obstacles	Small size of the market in BiH; lack of available information on benefits from primary and secondary cooperatives; cooperatives perceived as unreliable partners in the market.

Cooperatives in BiH are used to being at the receiving end of reforms and policies. Initiating changes in their internal structures, let alone their institutional environment, does not come across like something they would even consider exploring and that only rare ones among them attempted to do and on a very limited scale. A possible explanation for such behaviour can precisely be found in the history of cooperative movement in former Yugoslavia and consequently in BiH and can be seen as a

repercussion of many reforms that during socialism reduced cooperatives to instrument for ideological purposes.

Several issues highlighted by interviewed cooperative heads stand out as rather alarming. Although there is a state level law on cooperatives that regulates, among other things, the status of their property, much of the cooperative property is still not legally recognized as such. This is very limiting in terms of cooperatives making new investments and diversifying the usage of the property as any such move would be considered risky. The matter of unresolved property rights usually burdens the pre-war cooperatives as they are the ones that 'inherited' property that was called 'social property' prior to introduction of market economy system in BiH. Banks and landing institutions in BiH are rather careful with extending their credit opportunities towards farmers partly because of the farmers' inability to prove ownership over property with 'social' status. On the other hand, state structures do not provide adequate financial support for investments but rather distribute their budget through direct subsidies programmes which mainly target big producers and have in recent years been inspected for many irregularities. This creates a vicious circle in which cooperatives are being trapped between the consequences of the old times and requirements of the new market economy.

Since the end of socialism and introduction of new socio-political system in BiH, state structures go out of their way to show that they no longer practice any socialism-like policies and instruments. For cooperatives this means that they are almost entirely left out of strategic discussions and documents as they are not perceived as partners that could (or should, for that matter) be used to implement some of the development goals often propagated through strategic documents. From total involvement of the state into work of cooperatives to a complete loss of interest in cooperative model, BiH authorities disregard the economic arguments supporting the strengthening of cooperative sector. Additionally, Cooperative Association of BiH works in a very limited capacity and is no real position to influence neither the policy-making process nor level of social trust generated through existing cooperatives.

Another phenomenon that burdens the cooperative sector in BiH is mushrooming of the so called 'family cooperatives', entities that register as cooperatives but remain closed to membership from anyone outside the immediate family. In the aftermath of the war BiH was the destination for much of the international donor aid, and many of these cooperatives emerged overnight just to take part in and benefit from development projects by using the social aspect of cooperative to cover what essentially was a private firm. Some of them continued functioning under the label 'cooperative' but remain negligible contributors to community development. Most of them show rather good financial performance. It was repeatedly reported during interviews that it is difficult to enter into any sort of consortia with these (successful) cooperatives because they do not wish to practice cooperative principles despite the fact that they are registered cooperatives.

While globally cooperatives are showing admirable levels of resilience to the crisis and general financial stability (Stiglitz, 2009), cooperatives in post-socialist context of BiH are in fact unable to show a minimum level of trust in the principles of cooperation as well as their fellow cooperative partners in the market. The belief that cooperative model is somehow outdated, a thing of the past, limits the reformative processes in the sector itself. Lack of initiative to change the present situation

exemplified just how deeply engraved are the values of socialist past in those working in cooperatives and cooperative associations. Moving forward and bringing cooperatives to their full potential would require serious institutional engineering and restructuring that must start by defending globally the essence of cooperative identity so that post-socialist countries can rethink their own view of cooperatives and what can be achieved through cooperative model.

(5) Conclusions

Cooperatives are different from conventional enterprises and corporations. Their difference is part of their cooperative identity and it is to be sought not in comparing economic aspects of cooperatives to conventional corporations but in highlighting the communal contribution created through their ability to foster social trust and sustain effective growth and development. Clearly articulating and understanding cooperative identity and development the potential of cooperatives is especially important for cooperatives that have had a history of existence during socialist times and that, in the face of new socio-economic circumstances, have to redefine their role in a society. This paper utilized a case study of a cooperative business network of agricultural cooperatives in BiH as a way of showing how visible is the problem with understanding cooperative identity in a post-socialist and post-conflict context. While cooperatives in developed countries enjoy an institutional environment that enables their functioning, the same cannot be said for cooperatives that struggle for bare survival in post conflict and institutionally unstable systems. There is a need to think about the ways in which cooperative movements can be redesigned in these countries with the view to fully integrating the seven ICA principles of cooperation as the minimal essence of the cooperative identity. Presently, many cooperatives in the post-socialist world are cooperatives just in a name without any real substance to back their choice of enterprise kind. This article shows that while much of the current debate on viability of cooperatives focuses on their economic function, the very essence of cooperative identity is at danger in some parts of the world because the present context has made it hard to reinvent cooperative identity without clear guidance and help from outside.

References: