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ABSTRACT:

The socio-economic context is constantly challenging traditional employment relationships while new forms of employment are emerging, with acute risk of precarity for workers. In Europe, some non-standard workers find collective action as a valid alternative to the isolation and experiment solidarity and access to social security thanks to innovative cooperative models. The argument of the research is that the cooperative of independent workers is a viable opportunity to secure the working path of non-standard workers. The research focuses on a multiple case study approach involving three European cooperatives: the Italian Doc Servizi, the European Smart, and the Parisian Coopaname. The analysis of common and different practices among the cooperatives will show how cooperation can mitigate non-standard workers isolation and precariousness, how similar strategies are applied in different European countries, and how legal frameworks influence the operability of cooperative models. JEL Code: O35 (social innovation)

RESUMEN:

El contexto socioeconómico desafía constantemente las relaciones laborales tradicionales mientras surgen nuevas formas de empleo, con un grave riesgo de precariedad para los trabajadores. En Europa, algunos trabajadores atípicos encuentran la acción colectiva como una alternativa válida al aislamiento y experimentan la solidaridad y el acceso a la seguridad social gracias a modelos cooperativos innovadores. El argumento de la investigación es que la cooperativa de trabajadores independientes es una oportunidad viable para asegurar el camino laboral de los trabajadores atípicos. La investigación se centra en un enfoque de estudio de caso múltiple que involucra a tres cooperativas europeas: la italiana Doc Servizi, la European Smart y la parisina Coopaname. El análisis de prácticas comunes y diferentes entre las cooperativas mostrará cómo la cooperación puede mitigar el aislamiento y la precariedad de los trabajadores atípicos, cómo se aplican estrategias similares en diferentes países europeos y cómo los marcos legales influyen en la operatividad de los modelos cooperativos. JEL Code: O35 (social innovation)

KEY WORDS:

WORKER, COOPERATIVE, NON-STANDARD EMPLOYMENT, COOPERATIVE OF INDEPENDENT WORKERS, DECENT WORK.

PALABRAS CLAVE:

TRABAJADOR, COOPERATIVA, EMPLEO NO ESTÁNDAR, COOPERATIVA DE TRABAJADORES INDEPENDIENTES, TRABAJO DECENTE.



RÉSUMÉ

Le contexte socio-économique défie constamment les relations de travail traditionnelles alors que de nouvelles formes d'emploi apparaissent, avec un risque sérieux de précarité pour les travailleurs. En Europe, certains travailleurs atypiques trouvent l'action collective comme une alternative valable à l'isolement et expérimentent la solidarité et l'accès à la sécurité sociale grâce à des modèles coopératifs innovants. L'argument de la recherche est que la coopérative de travailleurs indépendants est une opportunité viable pour sécuriser la voie de travail des travailleurs atypiques. La recherche se concentre sur une approche d'étude de cas multiple impliquant trois coopératives européennes : l'italienne Doc Services, l'European Smart et la parisienne Coopanam. L'analyse des pratiques communes et différentes entre les coopératives montrera comment la coopération peut atténuer l'isolement et la précarité des travailleurs atypiques, comment des stratégies similaires sont mises en œuvre dans différents pays européens et comment les cadres juridiques influencent le fonctionnement des modèles coopératifs.

JEL Code: O35 (social innovation)

RESUMO

O contexto socioeconômico desafia constantemente as relações tradicionais de trabalho, enquanto novas formas de emprego emergem, com risco grave de precarização para os trabalhadores. Na Europa, alguns trabalhadores atípicos acham a ação coletiva uma alternativa válida ao isolamento e experimentam a solidariedade e o acesso à segurança social devido a modelos cooperativos inovadores. O argumento da investigação é que a cooperativa de trabalhadores independentes é uma oportunidade viável de garantir a trajetória de trabalho dos trabalhadores atípicos. A investigação centra-se em um enfoque de estudo de caso múltiplo envolvendo três cooperativas europeias: a italiana Doc Servizi, a European Smart e a parisiense Coopaname. A análise das práticas comuns e diferentes entre cooperativas mostrará como a cooperação pode mitigar o isolamento e a precariedade dos trabalhadores atípicos, como estratégias semelhantes são aplicadas em diferentes países europeus e como os marcos legais influenciam o funcionamento dos modelos cooperativos.

JEL Code: O35 (social innovation)

MOTS-CLÉS:

TRAVAILLEUR, COOPÉRATIVE, EMPLOI NON STANDARD, COOPÉRATIVE DE TRAVAILLEURS INDÉPENDANTS, TRAVAIL DÉCENT.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE:

TRABALHADOR, COOPERATIVA, EMPREGO NÃO PADRÃO, COOPERATIVA DE TRABALHADORES INDEPENDENTES, TRABALHO DECENTE.

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CONTEXT

While standard employment (a job that is continuous, full-time, with a direct relationship between employer and employee based on labour law) remains dominant, since the year 2000 in Europe new forms of employment are increasing.¹

In recent decades technology has changed the labour market causing both a polarization and a de-industrialization of employment. These phenomena involve an increase of high and low-level positions, a shift of the employment from the manufacturing sector to the service sector and a growing diffusion of small or very small enterprises, often composed of a single individual. Today, in Europe over 90 % of companies are SME, even micro, which implies an increasing choice of outsourcing peripheral functions, organizing work through projects, and adopting flexible contracts to respond to fluctuations in demand and to replace temporarily absent workers.

At the same time, labour trends show an increase of freelancers that can easily enter the market thanks to the diffusion of laptops, smartphones, and the Internet.² For workers (especially those who have high level skills), the choice of working as freelancers and entrepreneurs emerge for different reasons, ranging from the necessity to work (because they do not find a steady employment or because their sector of activity functions intermittently) to a reasoned choice to work in all autonomy.³ This choice is related to the increasingly refusal of employee subordination and the desire for more independent forms of work to achieve work life balance, follow its own passion, and choose when, how and with whom to work.

Most of these freelancers stand at the margins of the traditional employee relationship and experiment new forms of employment,⁴ which have in common the need or desire for flexibility, for either the employer/client or the worker, or both. Consequently, beyond the classic one-to-one employment relationship, we observe the growth of employment relationships with multiple employers/contractors for each worker, one employer for multiple employees for one specific job, or even multiple employer-multiple employee relationships. Especially, when workers hold several jobs and multiple income sources at the same time, they become «slashers», a phenomenon that is constantly increasing in Europe, representing over 4 % of the labour market.⁵ The flexibility is also related to more discontinuous or intermittent activities, which are performed from multiple locations thanks also to the support of the ICT.⁶

In the 2010-decade, independent professionals, most often solo-self-employed, are one of the fastest growing labour market segments,⁷ together with agency workers since 2016.⁸ According to the European Working Conditions Survey 2015, around 16 % of workers in the EU are ICT-based mobile workers (8.5 % occasional, 4.6 % highly mobile, 3 % self-employed),⁹ some 20-30 % of workers are engaged in some kind of independent work,¹⁰ and from 2002 and 2017 the share of part-time employment and temporary employment grew respectively from 15.6 % to 19.4 % and from 12.4 % to 14.3 % (Eurostat).

Considering that most new forms of employment belong neither to standard employment nor to liberal professions under self-employment, European countries are facing some difficulties in shaping these new forms of employment into their employment law, usually based on the standard employment relationship. For this reason, new forms of

1 Irene Mandel, "New Forms of Employment: 2020 Update, New Forms of Employment Series", Publications Office of the European Union, December 15th, 2020, <https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/report/2020/new-forms-of-employment-2020-update>.

2 Pascale Charhon, *Travailleurs Autonomes en UE, Action collective et représentation d'intérêts* (Pour La Solidarité, 2019), <https://www.pourlasolidarite.eu/sites/default/files/publications/files/ed-2019-travailleurs-autonomes.pdf>.

3 Charhon, *Travailleurs Autonomes en UE*; Sofia Pérez de Guzmán et al., *Slash Workers in a European Context, Labour Identities, Working and Living Conditions, Social Protection and Collective Representation* (Universidad de Cádiz, 2021).

4 Mandel, "New Forms of Employment".

5 Anna Soru & Cristina Zanni, "Contingent and Slash Workers in Europe. An analysis of Eurostat Data", Working Paper Swirl Project, 2020, <https://www.swirlproject.eu/2021/04/wp1-contingent-and-slash-workers-in-europe/>.

6 Mandel, "New Forms of Employment".

7 Soru & Zanni, "Contingent and Slash Workers in Europe"; Patricia Leighton, "Future Working: The Rise of Europe's Independent Professionals (iPros)", PCG & EFIP, 2013, <http://www.kizo.nl/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/iProsSMALL.pdf>.

8 Soru & Zanni, "Contingent and Slash Workers in Europe".

9 Oscar Vargas-Llave *et al.*, "Telework and ICT-Based Mobile Work: Flexible Working in the Digital Age, New Forms of Employment Series", Publications Office of the European Union, 2020, https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/sites/default/files/ef_publication/field_ef_document/ef19032en.pdf.

10 Sarah de Heusch, "The Blurring of Employment Boundaries: A Social Economy Perspective", in *The Deconstruction of Employment as a Political Question. Employment as a Floating Signifier*, ed. Amparo Serrano-Pascual & María Jespen (Palgrave MacMillan, 2019).



employment end up falling into the “grey zone” of employment¹¹ that gathers a broad diversity of situations and very different degrees of autonomy and often very limited access to social protection.

The “grey zone” includes temporary employment, part-time and on-call work, multi-party employment relationships, dependent self-employment, and self-employed without employees (own-account workers): briefly, what it is today called non-standard employment.¹² It is difficult to assess how many workers are in non-standard forms of employment in the European Union labour market, but we know that: 14 % are in temporary contracts, 20 % work part-time, and nearly 10 % are own-account self-employed.¹³

Non-standard employment means that working time, health and safety requirements and responsibilities are not regulated as well as in standard employment. And non-standard workers have only restricted access, or even no access at all, to social protection schemes, such as unemployment benefits, sick and maternity leave, and schemes covering accidents at work. For example, in Europe, more than 50 % of independent workers are not covered by unemployment benefits.¹⁴ Unlike standard workers, they also lack access to lifelong learning and safety training, which lead them to be at greater risk of injury at work. Eventually, non-standard workers are usually isolated on the labour market and therefore suffer a lack of representation because they often face barriers to joining a union and are not always covered by collective bargaining agreements.¹⁵

Moreover, due to their condition as contingent workers, non-standard workers earn on average less than standard workers. This is especially evident for self-employed people because their preparatory and dissemination work (e.g., communication, training, sale, rehearsal, etc.) is “invisible” and rarely paid off by the work contract.¹⁶ Additionally, they are not protected by minimum wages as standard workers, therefore they suffer the dumping of newcomers and the competition with other freelancers. The result is that in the context of the global stagnation of workers’ incomes since the 1970s,¹⁷ incomes of self-employed workers are decreasing since the 1990s.¹⁸ In Europe, the proportion of self-employed working part-time increased over the past years, while self-employed without employees experienced reduction in work time¹⁹ implying a further reduction in earnings.

The “invisible work” of freelancers is also related to the self-exploitation phenomenon, which has an impact on work-life balance, physical and mental health, and to the risk of “entrapment”, which means that entering the labour market immediately facing precariousness and uncertainty can make non-standard work a permanent condition.²⁰

To face these specific difficulties, during the last thirty years some European workers have sought solutions by experimenting with collaborative and mutualistic practices within the “grey zone”. Even if the “grey zone” is a heterogeneous zone in the employment law, it is not a “no-law” zone, but a zone where it is even possible to invent new rights and institutions.²¹ And that is the reason why, in the “grey zone”, among the new forms of employment, Eurofound identifies collaborative employment too.²² Collaborative employment refers to networking, co-working

11 Laura Castelvetti, *Le fonti del diritto del lavoro* (Padova: CEDAM, 2010).

12 International Labour Organization [ILO], “Non-Standard Employment Around the World: Understanding Challenges, Shaping Prospects”, ILO, 2016, https://ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_534326.pdf.

13 Donald Storrie, “Aspects of Non-Standard Employment in Europe”, Publications Office of the European Union, 2017, http://publications.europa.eu/resource/cellar/def760c3-3d39-11e8-b5fe-01aa75ed71a1.0001.04/DOC_2; Lionel Fulton, *Trade Unions Protecting Self-Employed Workers* (ETUC: Brussels, 2018), <https://www.etuc.org/sites/default/files/publication/file/2018-10/CES-Brochure%20Report%20on%20self%20employment-UK.pdf>.

14 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD]. “OECD Employment Outlook 2017” (OECD Publishing, 2017).

15 ILO, “Non-Standard Employment Around the World”.

16 Sergio Bologna, *The Rise of European Self-Employed Workforce* (Mimesis International, edizione digitale, 2018).

17 Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Harvard University Press, 2013).

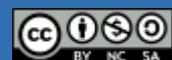
18 Bologna, *The Rise of European Self-Employed*; Alex Bird et al., “Not Alone. Trade Union and Co-operative Solutions for Self-Employed Workers”, *Cooperatives UK*, 2016, https://base.socioeco.org/docs/not_alone_-_trade_union_and_co-operative_solutions_for_self-employed_workers_3.pdf.

19 Colin Williams & Frederic Lapeyre, “Dependent Self-Employment: Trends, Challenges and Policy Responses in the EU”, (working paper n.o 228), International Labour Organization, 2017, https://www.ilo.org/employment/Whatwedo/Publications/working-papers/WCMS_614176/lang-en/index.htm.

20 Paolo Borghi et al., “Dimensions of Precariousness: Independent Professionals Between Market Risks and Entrapment in Poor Occupational Careers”, *Work Organisation, Labour & Globalization* 10, n.o 2 (2016).

21 Antonella Corsani, *Chemins de la liberté. Le travail entre autonomie et hétéronomie* (Éditions du Croquant, 2020).

22 Mandel, “New Forms of Employment”.



and cooperation between self-employed, especially freelancers, going beyond the usual types of relationships along the supply chain or business partner relationships.

The most structured example of collaborative employment is the experience of (worker) cooperatives in the fields of production, marketing and strategic management because, in most countries in which cooperatives exist, they are based on specific legislation that at least partly covers employment aspects.²³ Cooperatives are jointly owned and democratically controlled organisations characterised by an alliance among members to achieve goals they would not reach alone at the best ethical, social and economic conditions. This feature has allowed freelancers and other non-standard workers to experiment with innovative cooperative models that combine their peculiar needs in terms of flexibility and autonomy with social protections and more stable working conditions. They also facilitate working in collectives (permanent or changing) which is quite common for independent professionals and freelancers.²⁴ We identify this innovative cooperative model as cooperative of independent workers²⁵ and in the following paragraphs we are going to describe and then analyse long lasting cooperatives belonging to three European countries, namely Italy, Belgium and France.

COOPERATIVE OF INDEPENDENT WORKERS IN ITALY, BELGIUM AND FRANCE

The increase of new forms of employment is directly related to the increase of non-standard employment which is based on a high level of flexibility in the employment relationship. The flexible employment relationship is an answer to three trends. Firstly, the labour market, which is more and more fragmented due to the practices of outsourcing and the technological evolution, and it leads workers to the risk of precariousness, related to the growth of part-time and short contracts, and self-employment. Secondly, the digital and technological evolution has lowered production costs²⁶ and made it much simpler to start a business and find clients or paid tasks. And, eventually, the new aspirations of a growing number of workers for autonomy and refusal for hierarchy.²⁷

Among new forms of employment, Eurofound also identifies some attempts to bridge autonomy and social security through collaborative employment, and especially through (worker) cooperatives.²⁸ In the next paragraphs we are going to directly focus on cooperatives with the goal to provide mutualised business solutions, decent working conditions and access to social protection schemes to freelancers. According to CECOP, the voice of European cooperatives in industry and services, we are going to call them cooperatives of independent workers.²⁹

Cooperatives of independent workers mutualise services or equipment (e.g., accounting services, marketing services, consulting and legal services, co-working spaces, etc.) among members to support their production or business activities which are performed on their own account. For this reason, to some extent, it can be considered as a “shared service cooperative”. The cooperative is governed by members³⁰ who can belong to various economic activities (e.g., entertainment, communication, IT, etc.) and, depending on its members’ sectors of activities, it can be described as “artists’ cooperative”, “freelancer cooperative”, and so on. CECOP underlines also that although the main goal of the cooperative of independent workers is not to provide employment solutions to the workers, cooperatives of such typology put a strong emphasis on generating sustainable employment by joining the forces of workers who are usually isolated and precarious in the labour market and providing solutions to non-standard employment.

²³ Mandel, “New Forms of Employment”.

²⁴ Julien Charles et al., *Pratiques et organisation du travail démocratique chez Smart-rapport final* (Smart, Cridis-Iacchos-UCLouvain et CESEP, 2018).

²⁵ European Confederation of Industrial and Service Cooperatives [CECOP], “All for One. Response of Worker-Owned Cooperatives to Non Standard Employment”, CECOP, 2019, <https://cecop.coop/uploads/file/ExTB9Rdy731ZbXOzgF5Y7eYLjww28I6r0HsOPTX.pdf>.

²⁶ Jeremy Rifkin, *The Zero Marginal Cost Society. The Internet of Things, the Collaborative Commons, and the Eclipse of Capitalism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

²⁷ Pérez de Guzmán et al., *Slash Workers in a European Context*; Julien Charles et al., “Smart-Belgique comme capacité collective. Usages d’une coopérative de travailleurs autonomes”, Smart, 2019, <https://smartbe.be/fr/comprendre/publications/education-permanente/smart-belgique-comme-capacite-collective-usages-dune-cooperative-de-travailleurs-autonomes/>.

²⁸ Mandel, “New Forms of Employment”.

²⁹ CECOP, “All for One”.

³⁰ In the paper with the term “member” we refer to a person who is part of the cooperative, in most cases as worker, while with the term “shareholder” we refer to a member who also bought a share of the cooperative and therefore is also a co-owner.



In Europe, we find some structured long-lasting examples of cooperatives of independent workers regrouping workers experimenting new forms of employment. The reference goes to the model of self-management platform cooperative developed by the Italian cooperative Doc Servizi (1990), the Smart cooperative model created by Smart Belgium (1998), and the French model of Business and Employment Cooperatives (BEC) with the example of the Parisian Coopaname (2004).

In the next pages, with a multiple case study approach based on primary data, we will underline how each of these cooperative models has different features regarding the reason they were created, their organisation (how they employ their members and the structure), the role of technology, and their social and political specificities. We will then analyse their common and different practices and focus on some challenges for the future.

Doc Servizi in Italy

Artists have always lived uncertain and contingent working conditions for the characteristics of their job, which is inconstant, often precarious and thus related to low incomes. Facing this uncertain panorama, in Italy since the 1980s some artists choose to practice cooperation to obtain professional recognition and more constant contracts. Artists' cooperatives focus on some specific needs: sharing of resources, legal recognition for non-standard work and access to social protection mechanisms, opportunities for cooperation among professionals, autonomy in the management of personal activities, introduction of technology to redistribute wealth and, in some cases, representation of their needs in front of institutions.

In the cooperative, artists obtain the double status of worker shareholder: as workers, they become employees of the collective organization and access the typical rights of employees, such as health insurance, pension, family leave, sick pay and unemployment, and have the certainty of working safely and legally; as shareholders, they become entrepreneurs of the cooperative and, through the democratic management, they can choose how to orient the business to achieve the goals that they would not achieve alone.

One of the first cooperatives created in Europe with the purpose described is Doc Servizi.³¹ Doc Servizi is a self-management cooperative platform that was founded in 1990 as a worker cooperative by ten musicians to obtain decent work at the best economic and moral conditions and with the purpose to collectively valorise their work by sharing job opportunities, creating working teams and organizing specific training to increase their expertise. In 2019, Doc Servizi counted 6,800 members spread in 33 branches in Italy and closed with a turnover around 58 million euros.

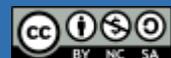
In entertainment cooperatives, such as Doc Servizi, members usually choose to organize themselves to safeguard a certain level of autonomy in the execution of their work because workers in the artistic sector are unique and cannot be replaced due to their professionalism and specific competence. Starting from this awareness, in the cooperative, professionals organize themselves to be free to manage their activity and at the same time be able to “collaborate” in the cooperative, where they share the management costs, investments for the future and their aspirations as a community. Concretely, entertainment cooperatives apply the Italian “job on-call contract” (art. 13-18 of D.lgs. 81/2015 “Jobs Act”).³² This contract remains active even when the work activity is suspended and it guarantees the continuity of relationship and social security. Using this contract to become employees of the cooperative, show business workers have the opportunity both to safeguard their autonomy in the management of their activity and obtain the social protection of employees.³³

The entertainment cooperative model, which can be defined as a self-management cooperative, thanks to its ability to combine the continuity of a working relationship with respect for artistic individuality, over the years has attracted all the figures who revolve around the world of entertainment (technicians, teachers, photographers, communicators, etc.) as well as other professionals accustomed to working with high levels of independence (IT workers, artisans, journalists, riders, etc.). For this reason, even if Doc Servizi still focuses on the entertainment

³¹ Website: <http://iprofessionistidellospettacolo.docservizi.it>.

³² “Contratto di lavoro intermittente”, also called “contratto a chiamata”.

³³ Francesca Martinelli, “Autonomie professionnelle, entrepreneuriat et coopération. Le cas des Coopératives d'Activités et d'Emploi en France”, (PhD Thesis, Università di Bergamo and Paris VIII Vincennes-St.-Denis, 2017), https://aisberg.unibg.it/handle/10446/77189#_WpPjcyOh1p8; Martinelli, “Pegasus company. Un modello innovativo di cooperazione in Europa”, in La Persona Il Lavoro, dir. R. Moresse, 1° Annuario dell'Associazione Astrolabio del Sociale Premio Pierre Carniti (Edizioni Lavoro, 2019).



field, it is part of a bigger network of cooperatives that together cover all sectors of the cultural and creative industries³⁴ and in 2019 counted more than 8,400 members in Italy and have a turnover around 72 million euros.

Within Doc Servizi, members chose to invest in expanding the community and strengthening the cooperative's role as a business facilitator by optimising costs and services. Therefore, they share administrative and accounting management's costs, the cost of specialised consultants, experts in writing employment contracts, advice on social protection, workplace safety training (which is mandatory in Italy) and the bureaucracy for working abroad. Members also set up offices dedicated to promote their business, such as the marketing and communication office, the tender office and the local branches. They also created dedicated business units in the cooperative that support specific professions, such as a travel agency for those who are often on tour, an e-commerce to sell products, an independent publishing house, a promotion agency for artistic projects, and specialised training centres for entertainment technicians and drone pilots.

To better exchange job opportunities, ideas and work with each other, members of Doc Servizi created communities linked to individual professions (e.g., entertainment technicians, photographers, journalists, etc.), which also help them build business units (e.g., music band, communication agency, events producers). Each business unit of members enters in the market with its personal brand that autonomously looks for job opportunities, but job opportunities can come from Doc Servizi too, which can either collect a client's request or promote the work of members (e.g., through calls for tenders or simply by proposing projects on the market) using the support of product managers³⁵ who are in charge to manage projects within a community and help members in building work teams.³⁶

The organization of all activities is possible thanks to an in house digital platform. The digital platform was created as a management software to better manage discontinuous work. Over the years it has become a tool to support self-management and self-entrepreneurship. From the heart of the platform dedicated to work management today various platforms are connected to each other, and connect members and partners with customers, through, for example, showcase sites or e-commerce of products. The principles on which the platform is built are inspired by those of the blockchain, i.e., security, transparency, trust and quality, as well as cooperative ones.

In Doc Servizi, the coverage of the general costs necessary for the management of the cooperative is done through a deduction from the turnover of each member, which currently corresponds to 14 %. This levy makes it possible to carry out all the cooperative's activities including the investments in new initiatives and projects, and the capitalisation of the structure.

Regrouping workers usually fragmented on the market, Doc Servizi has begun to advocate for its members with the support of the Centro Studi Doc Foundation.³⁷ Since 2011, the cooperative has participated in the public debate around rights and labour law regarding not only its members but all workers active in culture and creative industries. Two examples where the expertise of Centro Studi Doc Foundation was involved are a decree dedicated to the safety of technicians ("Decreto Palchi e Fiere") delivered in 2014 and the first Italian collective bargaining agreement (CBA) for the professionals of the arts who work in a cooperative signed in 2014,³⁸ and renewed in 2020 to protect all freelancers of cultural and creative industry and regulate platform work. In 2020, the Centro Studi Doc Foundation promoted the #nessunoescluso petition in favour of entertainment workers initially excluded from support related to the COVID-19 pandemic, and which in just a few months obtained more than 50,000 signatures. This made it possible to bring attention to the difficulties of the sector, including through hearings with the Government, and to resolve many of the inconsistencies that have made it difficult for intermittent and occasional workers in the performing arts to access bonuses over the months.

³⁴ The other societies of the network are: Doc Educational, Doc Creativity, Hypernova, STEA, Doc Live, Freecom. With Doc Servizi, they are a joint cooperative group. More info here: <https://docservizi.retedoc.net/en/>.

³⁵ A product manager is a professional role that is responsible for the development of products for an organization.

³⁶ Martinelli, "Pegasus company".

³⁷ Website: (www.centrostudiodoc.org).

³⁸ Chiara Chiappa & Francesca Martinelli, "Doc Servizi e la sua rete: un esempio di alleanza tra cooperazione e sindacati nel mondo dello spettacolo, della creatività e della cultura", *Quaderni di Rassegna Sindacale* 2, n.o 13 (2019): 109-123.



Smart in Belgium

Smart started out as a non-profit organization for artists in Belgium in 1998, today it is a cooperative of freelancers and entrepreneurs from different sectors of activity, and it is active in 8 EU countries (Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Sweden and the Netherlands). Here we will speak of the Belgian model as it is the first, the one that proposes most services and that counts most members. Smart allows freelancers and entrepreneurs to develop their economic activity autonomously while accessing a double solidarity: the one linked to the mutualisation of means and risks as well as the one linked to the access to the most protective working status: the salaried worker.

From the inception the idea was to provide artists with mutualized services designed around their specific needs, that is: having multiple clients, working alone or in changing teams, having changing roles (sometimes leading teams, sometimes working for other people's projects), often developing different jobs, being highly mobile professionally, dealing with expenses and intellectual property rights. In Belgium, artists are considered as salaried workers by law, even though they work intermittently. In French, "salaried worker" refers to a legal status while "employee" puts emphasis on the fact the worker is employed or given a job. As a vast majority of Smart members are in the discontinuity of employment, speaking of salaried status puts forward the idea of social protection linked to such status rather than a steady employment.

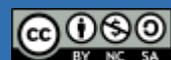
This flexible though protective model has attracted workers from other sectors of activity as well, that were facing the same need for autonomy and security. Even more as the model proposes mutualized services that would be more expensive or difficult to access on their own. Services such as: simplification of administrative, financial and legal aspects of running an activity that are managed on-line through a digital platform. And other services such as debt collection, insurances (civil liability, accident at work extended to private life as well as in the frame of professional mobility), personalised advice, mediation, training and third places. Members contribute directly to the functioning of the shared enterprise through a levy of 6.5 % collected on each invoice (without VAT), but actual cost is complemented by an employer's tax refund mechanisms mutualized at the level of the cooperative (which tops up to approximately overall 11 %).

Therefore, Smart considers itself as a shared enterprise, an alternative to having to create one's own enterprise (which holds very low survival rate in the first years of existence) or of having to be self-employed (which bears high risks of precarity). Especially with the Activity tool which allows members to manage their economic activity as if they had their own enterprise: allocating appropriately the income generated by an invoice (made by Smart in their name) into salaries and expenses and even intellectual rights. Managers of the Activity can work solo or in collectives (regular or changing teams following the needs of the projects), the tool allows for such flexibility. Members can therefore focus on their work and work opportunities, all the burden of managing a company (employers' duties, corporate tax etc) are collectively handled by the cooperative.

Beyond these proposed services, members also access a wide community of peers, that all have shares of the cooperative and which entitles them to participatory governance regarding the development of the cooperative. Smart members endorse not two but three roles: as in the other models presented in this paper, they are workers and co-owners of shares of the cooperative which provides them with access to governance of the commons created by the cooperative, and, as their income depends on their capacity to develop economic opportunities, they are also considered as entrepreneurs or economic agents.

If Smart started out as a non-profit organization in Belgium, it is because of philosophical acquaintance with social economy values, and a sort of tradition in the arts sector to develop under non-profit structures. Smart stands for "Société Mutuelle pour artistes" and started it out as a sort of labour mutual. The early use of an IT platform to manage the administrative aspects of the economic activities of members, allowed to service many members (in 2019, Smart counted over 20,000 active members), quickly scale, therefore increasing mutualized income that financed the string of services described above.³⁹ Smart was the first cooperative of independent workers to adopt this technology. It is when it internationalized its activities that Smart discovered the cooperative movement and realised it was most suited to its functioning, as well as to the relations it has with its members and its members to the structure.

39 Sarah de Heusch & Annalisa Murgia, "Organiser des trajectoires de travail hybrides: le cas de Smart", Smart, 2018, https://smartbe.be/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/12-2018-Organiser_trajectoires.pdf.



Therefore in 2015, with the change in management, Smart Belgium became a cooperative, a worker-owned multi-stakeholder cooperative. This transformation increased the democratic governance of the structure by involving more members in the development of the cooperative: increased number of members in the board of directors and development of thematic working groups that involve members beyond the formal General Assembly. Inspired by the French cooperative's movement, this transformation opened the path to many different changes. Before it even became a cooperative Smart launched its participatory process (called Smart in Progress, that involved permanent employees, members and partners in thematic working groups) to decide what type of cooperative it would become, it also called upon a working group to decide if it should open-up to the workers from other sectors of activity that wanted to join. The members of the working group unanimously claimed that the coop should be open to whoever needs it. This opened Smart to sectors of activity beyond the creative sector.

This evolution diversified the profiles of members: some have a truly entrepreneurial aspiration of growing and creating jobs, others work in sectors of activities or jobs where intermittency is widespread, for others freelancing is the only way to earn an income as they could not find a job that was suited for them on the labour market, others develop through Smart a job they like alongside a job that provides them with economic stability, others only invoice a few times a year income generated by their hobby. Lately, inspired by the French BEC model, Smart has developed the possibility to work under open-ended contracts. It depends of course on the members' need, desire and capacity to generate a minimum annual income.

These evolutions make Smart a unique observatory of workers who are both very diverse and at the same time that share common features linked to the discontinuity of work. They are usually addressed separately by policies (independent workers, artists, trainers, journalists etc) but Smart aims at raising awareness on their commonalities. To that end it has developed knowledge about these workers, through its own analysis and data, as well as through co-research with research centers. In line with the cooperative values, this knowledge both serves to raise political awareness and the life-long learning of its workers (be them freelancers or staff). Smart also collaborates on this issue with international cooperatives networks (Bigre, CECOP, ICETT, etc.) for mutual exchange of both formal and informal learning and knowledge development.

Therefore, the values of mutualisation and solidarity take multiple dimensions and are continuously evolving towards the creation of shared material and immaterial commons.

Coopaname in France

In France the history of cooperatives has been largely influenced by the legal framework, and still is today. Individual entrepreneurship boomed towards the end of the 1970s, in a context of economic crisis. At the time, the French government and public policies were seeing in the creation of a business "the" solution to mass unemployment and encouraged the creation of individual businesses with various support measures for creation. But in the early 1990s, the Departmental Directorate of Labor of the Lyon region noted that the creation of individual businesses by job seekers was not a viable solution, and it often created very precarious situations. A regional think tank was created and from a study on the issue presented in 1994, the business and employment cooperatives (BEC)⁴⁰ and incubators⁴¹ were born.

BEC and incubators were invented with the purpose to: allow a smooth transition to the greatest possible autonomy of the business creator; ensure the bridge between social income and economic income; increase the personal and technical skills of the person; offer security (without which all creativity is inhibited); and collectively build a personal project.

In 1995, the first BEC, Cap Service, was created. It welcomes people who wish to create their activity in different fields (craftsmen, consultants, trainers, writing and graphic design professions, etc.) and who wish to "learn" to be an entrepreneur.⁴²

Coopaname was born in this context, by the Founder of Cap Services, Elisabeth Bost: in 2004, the French cooperative network entrusted Elisabeth Bost with the creation of a cooperative in Paris, which would very quickly become the largest in France in terms of members.

⁴⁰ Coopératives d'activités et d'emploi (CAE).

⁴¹ "incubateurs".

⁴² Elisabeth Bost, *Aux entrepreneurs associés-La coopérative d'activités et d'emploi* (Éditions Repas, 2011).



Made up of around 820 people at the end of 2020, Coopaname welcomes people who want to become entrepreneurs and who have different levels of experience and different backgrounds. At first, these budding entrepreneurs join the cooperative with a Business Project Support Contract (BPSC),⁴³ which allows them to participate in the training and activities offered by the cooperative and to use the cooperative's registration number⁴⁴ to invoice. When their activity becomes stable and their turnover substantial, they become employees of the cooperative and their turnover is converted to salary. Finally, employees can become more involved in the life of the cooperative by also becoming shareholders members.

So, Coopaname has 820 members including 492 employees, 107 budding entrepreneurs (with a BPSC) and around 30 people in the staff. Coopaname also counts 191 people between: ephemeral cooperatives members (young people who want to test an economic activity for only 4-6 months); Coopératifs members (Coopératifs is a special structure dedicated to the personal service professions which in France have specific regulations); shareholders former employees and financial support (people who participated in the social capital but who do not work and have never worked in the cooperative). Most employees are also shareholders members and there are now 361 shareholders members. The number of shareholders include also former employees, but 76 % of the shareholders are currently employees of the cooperative.

The main objectives which have led to the creation of BECs in France are still priorities for Coopaname, and today the structure is mainly focused on two aspects: how to improve skills and learn the job of an entrepreneur, and how to support the collective construction of a personal project and the participation in a common project.

Training, peer-to-peer learning and other forms that contribute to personal development are the most important services that Coopaname offers to its members. The cooperative also provides administrative and accounting services.

The training program for buddies' entrepreneurs proposed by the cooperative is in some way its response to the creation of the status of self-entrepreneur⁴⁵ (now a micro-entrepreneur), which was introduced in France in 2008. Today, thanks to this status it is possible to open a microenterprise very easily, via internet procedures. However, micro-entrepreneurs are very alone facing their activity. When the government created this status, it did not provide any support, and people often find themselves in difficulty because they do not have the necessary expertise (administrative, accounting, legal, but also in marketing, communication, etc.) to assume this role. Many microenterprises do not generate enough turnover to survive and the average profits of microentrepreneurs are very low. According to a study of National Institute of Statistics and Economic Studies,⁴⁶ half of micro-entrepreneurs receive less than 290 euros per month from their self-employed activity. Their low income is linked to the nature of this scheme, which imposes a limit on turnover. It is often a side activity: 29 % of micro-entrepreneurs combine it with classic employed work.

Business and employment cooperatives like Coopaname can both help new entrepreneurs to improve their skills and solve the problem of the isolation of the self-employed. The cooperative offers a framework and a good environment where members can discuss the problems and difficulties they encounter. It also promotes exchanges between entrepreneurs providing shared spaces and organising events where cooperators can meet and start new collaborations. Moreover, the cooperative promotes activities carried out by a group of entrepreneurs (business units) who choose to create a common brand and to propose an offer that brings together the different skills that each one can contribute.

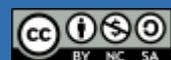
Cooperators are not obliged to stay in the cooperative for a minimum period, they are free to leave the structure at any time to create their own legal structure and to work independently. But it is interesting to note that members generally prefer to take a long-term approach and stay several years in the cooperative. The activities thus take place over a longer period rather than microentrepreneur's activities, and it is interesting to note that the cooperative in 2020 paid 5,178,000 euros in gross salary (for 492 entrepreneurs' employees).

⁴³ Contrat d'Appui au Projet d'Entreprise (CAPE).

⁴⁴ Numéro de SIRET.

⁴⁵ "auto-entrepreneur".

⁴⁶ Institut National de la Statistique et des Études Économiques [INSEE], "Emploi et revenus d'activité des micro-entrepreneurs", INSEE, 2020, <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/4470748?sommaire=4470890#consulter>.



It is important to note, however, that BECs were created in 1995 but until 2014 the system was recognized but remained an experiment. In France, it is the law of July 31st 2014, on the social and solidarity economy which recognized the general framework for a BEC and the decree of October 27th 2015, specifies the organizational and operating methods of BECs.

The status of a BEC's member is defined by the law on Social and Solidarity Economy of July 31st 2014,⁴⁷ as a natural person who creates and develops an economic activity benefiting from an individualized educational support and mutual services implement by the BEC, to become a shareholder member after three years from the signing of the contract with the cooperative. A new contract has been created specifically for BEC members, namely the Entrepreneur Employee Shareholder Contract.⁴⁸ This contract, equivalent to an open-ended contract, recognises the entrepreneur's autonomy in the generation of turnover, which is then converted into a salary.⁴⁹

	Doc Servizi	Smart Belgium	Coopaname
Date of birth	1990 Verona (Italy)	1998 Brussels (Belgium)	2004 (BEC 1995) Paris (France)
Created by	Ten musicians that wanted to obtain decent work at the best economic and moral conditions using the self-management cooperation model.	Artists, a music manager, an accountant and an engineer with the idea to develop artistic activities through mutualized services and a digital platform that makes it easier to invoice their multiple and discontinued activities.	The BEC network to be the «showcase» of the whole movement and represent its political needs.
Typology of cooperative of independent workers	Self-management platform cooperative.	A multi-stakeholder worker-based cooperative.	Business and employment cooperative (BEC).
Legal status	Worker coop and joint-stock company (cooperativa di produzione e lavoro modello Spa)	COOPERATIVE SOCIETY APPROVED AS A SOCIAL ENTERPRISE (SOCIÉTÉ COOPÉRATIVE AGRÉÉE ENTREPRISE SOCIALE _SCES)	Public limited company and cooperative production company (SA SCOP)
Law	Law No. 142 of 3 April 2001 and Civil Code, Articles 2511–2545.	Code of Companies and Associations of 23 March 2019, Book 6.	Law No. 2014–856 of 31 July 2014 relating to the social and solidarity economy; decree of October 27, 2015.
Main sectors	Entertainment and tourism (the whole network: cultural and creative industry, media and communication, teachers and educators, IT and innovators, safety experts, architects).	Arts sector counts for little less than half the membership, others are trainers, journalists, graphic designers, consultants, and well-being, etc.	Consultants, trainers, graphic designers, coaches, computer scientists, web designers, but also craftsmen, stylists, pastry chefs, bakers, etc.
Members in 2019	6,400 (8,000 the network).	26,516 freelancers (in Belgium and France).	820.
Shareholders in 2019	6,400 (8,000 the network).	31,787.	361.
Staff in 2019	180.	297.	30.
Turnover 2019	58 million (72 million the network).	204 million.	11 million.

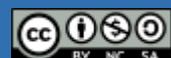
47 LOI n.° 2014–856 du 31 juillet 2014 relative à économie sociale et solidaire, Art. L. 7331–2, 3: <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/jorf/id/JORFARTI000029313796>.

48 Contrat Entrepreneur Salarié Associé (CESA).

49 Martinelli, “Autonomie professionnelle”.



Contracts applied	Worker member with on-call contract or smart worker contract, full time and part time contract for administrators.	Mostly (very) short term contracts but there is also the possibility to make long term contracts for those who generate enough income.	CAPE for buddies entrepreneurs, CESA (similar to an open-ended contract) for employee entrepreneurs.
Most spread employment relationship	95 % of workers have a temporary on-call employment relationship.	99 % are (very) short term contracts.	Mostly part time open-ended employment relationships.
Services for workers	Accounting, tax and billing, administration, labour and legal advice, h24/7 availability, initial and specialised training, travel agency, e-commerce, insurance, branches, foreign office, press office, credit recovery, fundraising and crowdfunding, audio and video post-production studio, independent label, management and booking, event production, security and safety management, marketing and communication, independent publishing house, production secretary, advocacy, research, showcase website.	Accounting, fiscal, financial and administrative services, billing, online platform available 24h/7, insurances (civil liability, accident at work and professional mobility), economic advice, legal advice, mediation, debt collection, information, training, third spaces (of which co-working spaces), advocacy, research.	Accounting, fiscal, financial and administrative services; online platform for administrative services and to exchange with other members (forum, chat, and messages); initial and specialised training; organisation of events to improve skills, meet other members and start new collaborations; third spaces (co-working and a food-lab).
Levy for mutual exchange of services	14 % deduction from the turnover of each member.	6.5 % levy on invoice (without VAT).	11.5 % of the turnover (with a minimum of 50 euros per month).
Organization of services	Doc Servizi is part of a network of seven societies that together cover all the cultural and creative industry and technology professions. It has 33 branches in Italy (1 branch in Paris).	Even though Smart had to decentralise its multiple activities in different legal entities, it acts as a single group. Its headquarters are in Brussels but it has offices in different cities (24between BE & FR).	Coopaname is a single structure with 7 places of reception in Ile-de-France where people can meet physically.
Technology/ digital platforms	Intranet, platform for self-organisation (payroll, billing, business trip, etc.), e-commerce, software for automatic content recognition.	Online platform where members declare their economic activity (order forms, contracts for themselves or in collectives, expenses & IPR) and/or working time and access all their work-related documents.	Online platform for both self-organisation (expense account, billing, etc.) and exchange with other members and staff (forum, chat, support, FAQ, etc.).
Working collectively and work team	Business unit of members (e.g., music group), product manager.	Activity tool.	Business unit composed of many members.
Community building	Community of professionals (Doc Crew, Doc Drones, Doc Artist, etc.).	Beyond the official GA ad board elections, to increase participation of Smart In Progress (SIP) enables members to develop recommendations for the development of Smart. Bigre! And co-working spaces.	Bigre! network, co-working, local events, online events organised by the staff.



DISCUSSION

Doc Servizi, Smart Belgium, and Coopaname all strive to offer decent work conditions and access to social protection schemes to “grey zone” workers who are at risk of precariousness and isolation on the labour market.

Despite they did not meet for many years,⁵⁰ were born in different context and countries,⁵¹ and are three different kinds of cooperative of independent workers,⁵² Doc Servizi, Smart Belgium, and Coopaname are a viable alternative to legal and social isolation of non-standard workers. The three cooperatives show that at least among Italy, Belgium and France there is an «evolutionary convergence»,⁵³ which means that workers who lived discontinuous work situations within the grey zone of work found similar solutions to their problems in different countries.

In the following paragraphs, we are going to support this thesis of the «evolutionary convergence» exploring some specific topics. Doc Servizi, Smart and Coopaname are built on an alliance among professionals that focus on some precise needs: improving business solutions with shared services, maintaining flexibility and independence while providing access to social security, and supporting business development and community building. Cooperatives of independent workers also bring a review of the concept of “subordination” and use the strength of the community to face the precariousness risk related to non-standard employment, which still is the most common form of employment in these cooperatives.

Improving business solutions with shared services

Each cooperative is based on mutualisation, which is the process that allows members to bring together the resources and means of each for the benefit of all. In the case of cooperatives of independent workers one of the purposes of mutualisation is to improve business solutions with shared services, collectively within a shared structure. In the three case studies, services support the development of business activities and the redistribution of wealth within the cooperative.

In Doc Servizi, Smart Belgium and Coopaname the basic mutualisation among workers is the share of management costs, with the cooperative that takes in charge the whole bureaucracy connected to each professional activity, such as employment, company taxation, administrative and accounting, payroll (the cost of such services is covered by a levy).⁵⁴ Beyond the share of management costs, Doc Servizi offers services and training tailored for specific artistic sectors (e.g. independent label, audio and video post-production studio, etc.). Coopaname puts a specific attention on community building through management training and education. And, like Coopaname, Smart develops democratic governance and training, and also provides its members with third spaces.⁵⁵

In all three cases, the services are also offered to members through a digital platform. Even with different timing, specific purposes and results, Doc Servizi, Smart Belgium and Coopaname introduced the technological platform to optimize and improve their organization, services, and activity. For Doc Servizi, the platform is a self-management tool tailored around the services needed by entertainment professionals (e.g., accounting, travel agency, press office, etc.), then outsourced to cooperatives operating in the whole cultural and creative field and technology. Similarly, Smart Belgium, first created it is platform to simplify administrative issues linked to artists’ work activity, free time from the repetitive tasks of calculation of social security contribution and taxation to

50 While the Coopaname and the Smart ecosystem are connected for more than 10 years, Doc Servizi met Smart Belgium only in 2013 and then Coopaname in 2016.

51 Doc Servizi (1990) was created in Italy to valorise collectively the work of professionals in the field of music, theatre and arts through self-management cooperation, similarly Smart Belgium (1998) was created in Belgium to support artists in the development of their intermittent activities, while Coopaname (2004) was created in France to offer a cooperative alternative to the individual creation of an enterprise.

52 Doc Servizi is a self-management platform cooperative, Smart Belgium is a mutual risk cooperative, and Coopaname is a Business and employment cooperatives (BEC).

53 Francesca Martinelli, “Innovative Cooperation’s Model in Europe. A Solution to the Growing Uncertainty in the World of Work” (conference paper), International Labour Process Conference, University of Buenos Aires, 2018; Martinelli, “Pegasus company”.

54 Doc Servizi: 14 % on invoices. Smart Belgium: 6 % directly on invoices, and the rest covered by tax return mutualized at cooperative level for a total percentage of 11 %. Coopaname: 11,5 % on invoices (with a minimum of 50 euros per month).

55 Third places are «social environments that come after home and work (...) Third places are important for civil society, democracy, civic engagement and establishing other appropriations and sharing of space. It is understood as a complementary component, intended for the social life of the community, and refers to spaces where individuals can meet, gather and exchange in an informal way» translated from <https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tiers-lieu>.



be more focused on advising artists as to other aspects of their work. Over the years the IT tool also allowed the development of autonomous economic activities, to function as autonomous enterprises. Over time Smart's membership also opened to the wide creative sector, and then to all freelancers. From the start, the platform allowed economies of scale and reinvestment into more mutualized services.⁵⁶ Smart was the first to use a digital platform beginning of the years 2000. While for Coopaname, the platform was at first introduced to support the exchange among workers and become more and more a tool to spare on management costs (e.g., accounting, billing, etc.). In any case, for all of these long history cooperatives, technology is not a purpose but a supporting tool for the economic activity of members.⁵⁷ Technology also allows economies of scale and therefore generates more funds for mutualisation to the benefit of the community.⁵⁸

Offering shared services to support members' activities, these cooperatives can be considered as both a service for their members and the enterprise of their members; a common tool. For their specific double nature, CECOP does not classify this typology of cooperatives in worker cooperatives, but as we explained at the beginning of the paragraph about the case studied it has identified a new kind of cooperative that is owned by workers and which is the cooperative of independent workers.⁵⁹

Maintaining flexibility and independence while providing access to social security

Doc Servizi, Smart Belgium and Coopaname offer workers the flexibility and autonomy of being freelancers self-employed while providing the status and social protection of employees. In the three cases, the freelancer becomes an employee of the cooperative and therefore he/she is entitled to social protection schemes of employees, such as unemployment benefits, sick and maternity leave, and schemes covering accidents at work. Not only do they benefit from these protections, they also pay contributions, nourishing solidarity and social funds. The cooperatives also provide, in different ways, access to more protective working conditions such as minimum hourly wage (which self-employed people do not access), minimum consecutive working hours, accident at work protection. Moreover, workers have access to lifelong learning and safety training, where applicable, provided by the cooperative. In this way too, Doc Servizi, Smart Belgium and Coopaname offer better work conditions and at lower cost to their members than the labour market.

At the same time, professionals keep autonomy in the management of their activity. Unlike a classic worker cooperative, the cooperative of independent workers is tailor-made for those who experience flexibility in employment. And for this reason, a worker's income is calculated on the basis of the actual income generated by his or her activity. Furthermore, professionals have the opportunity to keep the freedom in the management of activity (where, when, with whom, etc.) and in finding their clients.⁶⁰ These cooperatives allow members to function as if they had their own company, they are responsible for finding their own work opportunities, but share risks and benefits, which secures collectively the individual economic activities of members.

In the case of Coopaname, the 2014 law was a first step towards official recognition of this status and the operation of BECs. However, BECs remain privileged places for experimentation and social innovation, in which cooperators are trying to invent a framework that is better adapted to the practices and needs of a new generation of workers who want to keep social protection and mutualist practices while being autonomous in the commercial and entrepreneurial management of their activity.

Moreover, being part of a community gives freelancers more bargaining power, also because as employees of a company they have the chance to better exercise their rights to be represented by a trade union and protected by collective agreements. In the Doc Servizi case, the opportunity for artists to exercise union rights as employees of the cooperative led to the signing of a national agreement for the entertainment field that strongly supported not only the activity of the members of the cooperative, representing a first step towards the recognition of the specific nature of Doc Servizi, but also the opportunity to regulate work and support legality in the field of show business

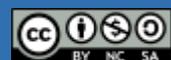
⁵⁶ de Heusch, "The Blurring".

⁵⁷ Martinelli et al., "Platform Cooperativism in Italy and in Europe" (working paper), CIRIEC, n.o 27 (2019), <http://www.ciriec.uliege.be/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/WP2019-27.pdf>.

⁵⁸ de Heusch, "The Blurring".

⁵⁹ CECOP, "All for One".

⁶⁰ Martinelli, *Innovative Cooperation's Model in Europe*.



by regulating for the first time many details of the work of professionals, such as minimum rates, safety and work schedule.⁶¹ Smart also allows freelancers to access protection linked to a collective agreement (which would not be possible as self-employed). While union representation differs, it is present in the three cooperatives through several modes. In the Smart case, since 2020, freelancers can even vote for their union representatives within the cooperative's social elections.

Supporting business development and community building

Entering the cooperative, workers usually isolated become part of a community within which they share aspirations and perspectives and take advantage of the «networking effect». Eurofound identifies the positive outcomes of the networking effect of collaborative employment in: reducing the social and professional isolation that can particularly affect the self-employed without employees, increasing the productivity and skills development, fostering an entrepreneurial spirit, decreasing entrepreneurial risk and thereby encouraging self-employment, which can improve work-life balance.⁶²

In the cooperative, freelancers meet other professionals and exchange working opportunities, knowledge and skills, developing new forms of solidarity at work. The cooperative itself can support the exchange and practice of working together among members (the Coopaname case), offering different types of third spaces to work and meet peers (the Smart Belgium case) or, in some specific cases, directly finding job opportunities for its members (the Doc Servizi case).

Moreover, within the cooperative, members can organise themselves in business units. A business unit identifies an autonomous organisational unit of an enterprise, which is dedicated to the management of a particular business. In cooperatives of independent workers, the business unit is the single economic activity of a member or a collective economic activity that regroups more members. The business unit, as an enterprise, allows to declare expenses, declare work performed and in the case of Smart and Coopaname to put aside money for further investments (in Coopaname's case there can even be depreciation of goods). In the case of collectives, we find members that work together in the same field or not, that would otherwise be organised in a single company (e.g., music band, crew of entertainment technicians, communication agency), members with the same job that exchange job opportunities and expertise (groups of photographers or communicators), or from different fields that enlarge business possibilities (e.g., a photographer that does a photoshoot for an interior designer). Each business unit enters in the market with its personal brand that autonomously looks for job opportunities based on its own personal portfolio of customers.

This cooperative model also has an impact on the theme of bankruptcy because cooperatives help small businesses not to fail, allowing them to focus on their business, to confront each other, not having to manage everything, at worst they stop working, and as they pay as they go, they leave no unpaid contributions and taxes (bankruptcy of VAT numbers in COVID-19 and bankruptcy rate in companies from 3 to 5 years).⁶³

A cooperative solution to overcome the conundrum of autonomy and subordination

The emergence of new forms of employment and related precariousness questions the meaning of the standard employment based on a “subordination mechanism” for which part of one's time is given to the employer in exchange of a wage, certain rights and social protection. Today it seems that there is more need to link the idea of salaried work⁶⁴ to the fact that people need social protection and safeguards rather than a bond of subordination.

We should not overlook the growing trend of workers (increasingly educated) who aspire to meaningful jobs and autonomy at work.⁶⁵ They want to develop jobs that they like (crafts, teaching, etc.) and/or that are meaningful (in line with their values). There is also a growing number of persons, especially in the younger generations, that simply refuse to be in subordination relations. The level at which this can put discomfort on individuals can be identified by the growing number of people in different countries that are experiencing burn-out or bore-out.

61 Martinelli, *Innovative Cooperation's Model in Europe*.

62 Mandel, “New Forms of Employment”.

63 Exception for France: auto-entrepreneur statute that if you don't work you do not pay taxes (2012).

64 See explanation of difference with “employee status” in section 2.2.

65 Charles *et al.*, *Pratiques et organisation du travail*; Pérez de Guzmán *et al.*, *Slash Workers in a European Context*.



Many members of the mentioned cooperatives shared this perspective, to the point that they express the fact that they prefer the uncertainty of income over giving up their aspirations at work.⁶⁶

Beyond the individual perspective of members, the experience of the three cooperatives studied demonstrates that a different connection among employee and employer is possible. In a cooperative each employee has the chance to be directly involved in the company because when a freelancer enters a cooperative, he/she becomes also a shareholder of a company based on democratic governance (“One member, One vote”) and he/she participates in the shared ownership buying a share of the cooperative.

As shareholders of the cooperative, they can vote at the general assembly and are eligible to the board of directors. Beyond the general assembly, to include shareholders’ perspective in the board’s decision, Doc Servizi has articulated an informal circular governance, which is based on the transmission of information and requests between members and managers of the cooperative through the branches and product managers who work on the territory. In Smart’s case freelancers have more seats than other members and can get involved in participatory processes that happen all year long (Smart InProgress). In Coopaname all shareholders gather at the general assembly to vote for the board of directors which then elects the co-directors (part of the staff) and the co-presidents (entrepreneur employees).

Consequently, members are more than employees because they are entrepreneurs that develop economic activity within their business unit within the cooperative, and they are also shareholders of the cooperative that as such govern the cooperative and share business management, costs and resources.⁶⁷ Cooperatives review the concept of subordination because workers subordinate themselves not to an employer but to the community of the cooperative that they voluntarily choose to belong to. In this perspective, subordination in a cooperative is instrumental and not at the core of the relationship between the member and the cooperative.

Non-standard is not a synonymous of precariousness

Non-standard forms of employment have increased over the past few decades in Europe, and their use has become more widespread across economic sectors and occupations. Also in the case of Doc Servizi, Smart Belgium and Coopaname the most frequent employment relationships are non-standard. But even if non-standard employment is usually associated with precariousness, the ILO remarks that these two concepts cannot be directly related: “Just as standard jobs can be precarious, it is also the case that non-standard jobs are not necessarily precarious —the two are not synonymous. Non-standard is about a contractual form, whereas precariousness refers to the attributes of the job”.⁶⁸ Linked to this assumption, the ILO identifies seven areas of potential work insecurity, which are employment, earnings, hours, occupational safety and health, social security coverage, training, representation and other fundamental principles and rights at work.

Using this prism for analysing decent work in non-standard employment, we observe that on average the three studied cooperatives improve the labour condition of non-standard workers who would otherwise operate alone in the labour market.

Each freelancer chooses freely and voluntarily to enter in one of the mentioned cooperatives that apply the principles of the “open door”. It means that every person is accepted if the mutualisation of the cooperative is able to answer to his/her need. The employment relationship is established on mutualisation, guaranteeing to each worker the most secure working status.

Concerning earning and hours, freelancers in a cooperative have more opportunities than isolated ones to exchange with peers and obtain work directly from the cooperative they belong to or from other members of the cooperative, which can eventually increase their activity with a positive effect on their revenues.⁶⁹

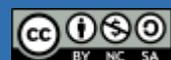
As employers, the cooperative takes care also of occupational safety and health of its workers offering dedicated insurances and safety training which prevent the risk of injuries.

66 Charles *et al.*, “Smart-Belgique comme capacité collective”; Martinelli, “Autonomie professionnelle”; Marie-Christine Bureau *et al.*, “Rapport enquête Revenus-Temps”, Coopaname et Oxalis. Coopaname, 2016, https://www.coopaname.coop/sites/www.coopaname.coop/files/file_fields/2017/10/12/enquete-revenu-temps-travail-2-juin-2016.pdf.

67 Martinelli, “Pegasus company”.

68 ILO, “Non-Standard Employment Around the World”, 18.

69 Chiappa & Martinelli, “Doc Servizi e la sua rete”; Bureau *et al.*, “Rapport enquête Revenus-Temps”; Martinelli, *Autonomie professionnelle*.



With Doc Servizi, Smart Belgium and Coopaname, freelancers have access to other branches of social protection such as unemployment, maternity leave and pensions. Anyway, we have to underline that the social security coverage for cooperative's members is lower than for workers in "standard employment" as the social protection model in the three countries (Italy, Belgium and France) is insurantial and proportionate with minimum and maximum levels of social benefits.

In the cooperative, freelancers also have access to *training* in the form of lifelong learning that can be tailored for a specific profession (the case of Doc Servizi) or generalist to acquire some soft skills useful to improve their own business (the case of Coopaname and Smart).

Finally, becoming employees of a cooperative, freelancers can with more ease exercise their *representation* and trade union rights and be protected by a collective agreement without risking to disfavour if they join a union. As members of the cooperative, workers can choose how to organize their enterprise and therefore guarantee themselves to work in safety, legality and respecting all their *rights at work*.

CONCLUSION

Doc Servizi, Smart and Coopaname provide cooperative solutions that respond to the new labour market trends exacerbated by the ongoing industrial revolution of automation and digitalization. In particular, they answer to the double nature of freelancers who both develop economic activities and need access to social protection since they operate in the "grey zone" of employment.

Even if the "grey zone" is an undetermined zone in the employment law, it is not a "no-law" zone, but a zone where it is possible to invent new rights and institutions.⁷⁰ In fact, the cooperatives studied and experimented with new forms of employment in the "grey zone" with the aim to answer the difficulties of the self-employed workers who are isolated and often live in uncertain employment and income situations.

These cooperatives are finding solutions within existing legal frames while reinventing them. Firstly, they reshape the relationship between subordination and autonomy, rebuilding and reinventing solidarity within ill-adapted frames by taking into account the realities of these workers. By creating a "common"⁷¹ of/for usually isolated workers, they rebuild solidarity practices in atomised forms of employment, reinforcing their capacity to answer the needs of the neglected ones. Moreover, at business level they introduce a new type of business model because the cooperative both safeguards self-management and flexibility and is a shared enterprise that workers plug into to develop their activities by sharing services, risks and benefits. Finally, at the social level, the cooperative enables these workers to access state organised social solidarity, to which they contribute to.

Today, Doc Servizi, Smart and Coopaname offer decent work conditions to more than 60,000 non-standard workers and freelancers, and with a growing number of workers living uncertain working conditions, cooperatives of independent workers become more and more viable alternative to isolation and unpredictable income due to non-standard employment. Additionally, the impact of COVID-19 has further shown the key role and resilience of cooperatives as a form of employment and support in economically challenging times. So experts expect cooperatives to become more commonplace in the anticipated economic and labour market crisis resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.⁷²

Moreover, the «evolutionary convergence» among Italy, Belgium and France, which is the fact that similar initiatives were created independently in different countries for similar profiles⁷³ is in our view the sign that they are a response to concrete needs. There is extensive literature on the situation of autonomous workers and their need for solidarity and protection, and in times of change (technologies, social and environmental challenges, etc.) where the market and the state are not providing adequate solutions, cooperatives of independent workers appear as ideal places to experiment new types of solidarity within the cooperatives but also maybe for a larger part of the labour market.

⁷⁰ Corsani, *Chemins de la liberté*; Martinelli, *Autonomie professionnelle*.

⁷¹ "The commons are shared resources, managed and maintained collectively by a community, which establishes rules to preserve and perpetuate these resources". Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (Cambridge University Press, 1990).

⁷² Mandel, "New Forms of Employment".

⁷³ Martinelli, *Innovative Cooperation's Model in Europe*; Martinelli, "Pegasus company".



But even if the presented cooperative solutions provide answers to part of the “grey zone” of employment workers’ needs, they lack solid recognition (be it through legal or policy frameworks, or through economic incentives). This lack of recognition is in stark contrast to the conclusions of some studies on experimentation in the field of new forms of employment. For example, in a recent research Eurofound underlines that opportunities presented by new forms of employment must not be undervalued because they have “the potential to contribute to the labour market integration of (and thus income generation for) specific groups, notably those disadvantaged in the labour market due to their need for flexibility in terms of working time or place of work”.⁷⁴ Therefore, Eurofound states that “awareness raising and measures supporting the introduction of such work patterns in a win-win form could be beneficial”.⁷⁵

As mentioned earlier in this paper, the existence of these cooperative solutions does not mean that States should abdicate from their prerogative of welfare state providers, quite the opposite. In the cases where other kinds of institutions such as cooperatives intervene to fill the gap in terms of quality of work, rights at work, social protections, these cooperatives should be recognised, supported and not hindered.

In the case of the cooperatives studied above, effective ways for public authorities to support and promote these models are multiple and have different scopes and connotations but they can be summarized as follows.⁷⁶

It is necessary for the relevant authority (mostly States) to provide an adequate legal framework for worker-owned cooperatives and regarding member status.⁷⁷ As we have seen, the solution proposed by cooperatives of independent workers does associate genuine autonomy with the security of salaried status, which until now, is the one that is best encompassed by social protection mechanisms. With a few exceptions in terms of legal status, which are rooted in the local economic and cooperative tradition, workers in worker cooperatives are worker owners (or workers who aspire ownership) who benefit from employment status.

Moreover, it is crucial to the workers’ wellbeing to access adequate social protection regardless of the type and duration of their employment relationship.⁷⁸ Welfare systems should acknowledge the wide diversity of non-standard employment and provide adapted solutions so that these workers access the social protection they need, in line with the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights and of the recent Transparent and Predictable Working Conditions Directive.

In this context of ever-growing precariousness and deterioration of rights at work and social protection systems throughout Europe, the national States should provide support for cooperative solutions and experiments for non-standard workers and self-employed, in particular independent workers. The support should be inspired by legal recognition, like it is the case in France with the law N.o 2014-856 of 31 July 2014 on the Social and Solidarity Economy, SSE,⁷⁹ and on an on-going monitoring of the innovative solidarity practices that arise and cannot be encompassed in present legal frameworks.

Much could be done at the European Union level as well, such as considering the needs of cooperatives in support mechanisms for enterprises and ensuring availability and adequacy of funding. As the models are uniquely tailored to incubate thriving microbusinesses while ensuring protection to the self-employed in charge, it is important for public authorities at all levels to recognize as well the economic activities of freelancers within shared enterprises, like cooperatives, as micro-enterprises as defined by the European Commission (EU recommendation 2003/361) and therefore distinguish these from the overarching cooperative when it comes to economic support (including regarding the De Minimis Rule). This way, both freelancers’ activity and cooperatives can be eligible to public support measures for enterprises, as they have different roles and different issues to deal with. For example, during

74 Mandel, “New Forms of Employment”, 55.

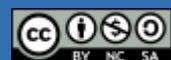
75 Mandel, “New Forms of Employment”, 55.

76 CECOP, “Policy Paper on Non-Standard and Platform Workers in the COVID-19 Crisis. a Worker-Owned Cooperatives’ Perspective”, CECOP, 2020, <https://cecop.coop/uploads/file/e7lrWPgZpXkusZeln4SQG3xNXsH8DWbDFnwibiaq.pdf>; CECOP, “All for One”.

77 CECOP states that regardless of the activity that is performed (and the level of autonomy) workers in cooperatives of independent workers should hold employee status with regards to the national law.

78 For example, misclassification of employment status is one of the most used shortcuts to avoid social contribution and related social protection benefits.

79 OECD/European Union, “The Law on the Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE), France”, in *Boosting Social Enterprise Development: Good Practice Compendium* (OECD Publishing, 2017).



the COVID-19 crisis, in different ways and to different degrees following the country and the mentioned case studies, cooperative enterprises and members have not been able to obtain all the aid to which they would have been entitled due to the double nature of cooperatives of independent workers' activities. Some of these cooperatives, as large enterprises, did not access economic support;⁸⁰ for others, the single activity developed by freelancers was not fully recognised and thus not supported at economic or social level.⁸¹ Frequently it was a mixture of both issues.

In this paper, which sets out to show the contributions made by Doc Servizi, Smart Belgium, and Coopaname cooperatives to the issues related to non-standard work, the authors have identified specific problematic situations to which the different cooperative models are responding.

After discussing analogies and differences among the three proposed cooperatives, the authors conclude that cooperatives are a laboratory experimenting innovative and sustainable forms of work and employment that do provide a response to the challenges of independent workers while respecting and supporting their aspirations for autonomy, creativity and community building.

Far from being mere anecdotes, the lessons we have drawn from the cooperative experience can, and should, serve as important ingredients for constructing a better present and future of work in Europe, in close collaboration with trade unions, public authorities and other actors.

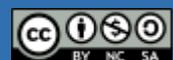
⁸⁰ Usually large for-profit companies have sufficient capital and assets to overcome the crisis, whereas workers' cooperatives are labour-intensive companies and thus have little capital and assets because all income goes to their worker members.

⁸¹ In some cases, cooperatives received temporary unemployment benefits for their employees (staff), but nothing or very little for members because of the difficulty of calculating this type of aid for workers whose salary is calculated in function of the incomes; in other cases, members were excluded from sector specific economic support.



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