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# Labour Transformation and Institutional Re-arrangement in France.

## A Preliminary Study of a Business and Employment Cooperative.

Mélissa BOUDES

### ABSTRACT

This case study investigates how a new cooperative, tackling labour transformation and French welfare regime disruption, build a new institutional arrangement. It enhances new institutional theory and offers new insights into cooperation among working people. It makes two main contributions: first, by highlighting how actors selectively couple the components of available institutional orders; and secondly, stressing the importance of meso-level dynamics and the crucial role of the fifth cooperative principle of *education, training and information*.

### INTRODUCTION

Globalisation and digitalisation are some of the recent changes that destabilise labour and the institutional arrangements regulating it. New forms of work emerge between employment and entrepreneurship (Cappelli & Keller, 2013) creating what is called the “grey employment zones”.

In a context of high and lasting rate of unemployment, these new forms of work are growing. However, they are located beside welfare institutional arrangement and are characterized by precariousness. Thus, in order to maintain good working conditions, these “grey employment zones” call for regulations, and new institutional arrangements.

The present chapter shows how, in such a context, a new type of cooperative - business and employment cooperative (*coopérative d'activité et d'emploi*) - is creating a new institutional arrangement. The first part presents the evolution of labour in France and how this affects the extant institutional arrangement. Secondly, business and employment cooperatives and the method used to study them are presented. The third part shows how this new type of cooperative is creating a new institutional arrangement. Finally, as a conclusion, the main insights for the cooperative movement are presented.

## LABOUR IN FRANCE

### **Disruption of welfare state institutional arrangements and the grey employment zones**

After the end of the Second World War, under the effect of economic growth and the development of the welfare state, employment became the work norm. The typical work form became the open-ended and full time employment relation with a unique employer (Fourcade, 1992; Méda, 2010).

This norm highlights our ambivalent relationship to labour. On the one hand, French case law characterises employment by subservient relation or, in other words, labour submission to capital. On the other hand, employment links people to a political community through access to national social protection. Indeed, the French social system relies on a Bismackian model where workers' contributions ensure protection for themselves and their family.

Until the end of the 1960's, the welfare state institutional arrangement relied on Fordist regulation, or in other words on massive workforce and unions-employers bargaining.

However, the socio-economic evolutions of the last decades - globalization, growing service economy, digitalisation, etc. - have profoundly disrupted this institutional arrangement. Global competition increases market flexibility, leading to growing worker insecurity, whereas the welfare state appears unable to (re)create appropriate/efficient solidarity links. Thus, since the first oil crisis, France has experienced high unemployment rates, which disrupt the equilibrium of the welfare regime. Since 1984, the unemployment rate has never fallen below 7% of the workforce, reaching 9.8% in 2013, according to the ILO. Moreover, according to the national French statistics institute, an additional 1.3 million people are not included in the statistics as they are looking for a job but are not available immediately, do not want a job or are discouraged from looking for one. As fewer workers are making contributions and a growing number of unemployed receive social benefits, the welfare budget is continuously in deficit (9.7 billion Euros in 2014).<sup>1</sup>

The labour market has gradually split, with on one hand "insiders", namely people with long-term employment contracts and the related social benefits, and on the other hand a growing number of "outsiders", namely jobless people or people with precarious contracts (self-employed, short term and/or part-time workers, etc.). The increasing gap between the two groups creates tensions. Whereas the former try to preserve their security and working conditions, the latter are tempted to

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<sup>1</sup> Commission des comptes de la Sécurité sociale, June 2015, quoted in « Les Chiffres clés de la sécurité sociale 2014 », Direction de la Sécurité Sociale, 2015.

consider them as the privileged few who are blocking the balancing mechanisms in the labour market.

To tackle unemployment, policy makers have developed specific legal statuses and adapted tax rates to encourage people to set up their own business. These incentives combined with the willingness of corporations to outsource some tasks and people's desire of autonomy at work, led to the increase of self-employment (Kunda, Barley, & Evans, 2002).

Consequently, a large range of work forms have developed between entrepreneurship and employment in what is labelled the "grey employment zones". A myriad of new organizations has emerged within these zones to allow self-employed people to access clients, to train, and to share means and/or risks. They have taken different forms ranging from web-platforms to co-working spaces through cooperatives and employers' associations (de Vaujany, Bohas, Fabbri, & Laniray, 2016; Jang, 2017; Lorquet, 2017).

These new forms of work and organizations located at the margin of the welfare state institutional arrangement raise questions about working conditions. How can be created, in these grey employment zones, new institutional arrangement favouring good work conditions? As one of possible answers, we focus on a new type of cooperatives that has emerged in France: the business and employment cooperative.

## **THE CASE OF BUSINESS AND EMPLOYMENT COOPERATIVES**

The first business and employment cooperative (BEC) was created in 1995 in the French city of Lyon by a group of public and private for-profit and not-for-profit organizations. Recognizing the inefficiency of the measures encouraging people to set up their own businesses (entrepreneurs' loneliness and lack of skills, economic risk, poverty, etc.), they decided to create a new organization that aims to support people in their entrepreneurial journey.

The objectives were:

*-“To reduce economic insecurity for individual project holders by allowing them to integrate their micro-projects and knowhow with work collectives with access to broader business opportunities”*

*-“To make professional pathways more secure by fostering, organizing and accompanying mutual apprenticeship within the work collectives”*

*-“To enable, via work collectives, a better economic integration of micro-entrepreneurs within local economic dynamics, and real wealth production for the territory”*

*-“To allow the emergence of a new economically efficient form of enterprise, exclusively dedicated to a social project, the professional fulfilment of its salaried members”* (Report - Evaluation of the mutualization devices within Coopaname - Plein Sens Consulting group)

Interestingly, Elisabeth Bost, who managed the first BEC and later the first BECs network, inspired by other experiences, chose the cooperative status *“to become a full-fledged stakeholder of the enterprise project that we share with the entrepreneurs.”* (Bost, 2011). BECs are cooperatives relying on the cooperative principles, aiming to allow their members to self-fulfil their needs, through a not-for-profit and democratic organization. Choosing the cooperative organizational form was choosing an approach that diverged from other forms of enterprises and provisions for support to entrepreneurs that rely either on a for-profit or on a public service basis.

Concretely, BECs offer their members a three-stage path mixing entrepreneurship, employment and cooperation. First, when entering the BEC, people sign a mentoring contract, which allows them to build and strengthen their projects through meetings, workshops, trainings and support by a personal advisor. While developing their project, people can keep their former status and rights. For example, an entrepreneur who works part-time as an employee or who receives unemployment benefit can combine the different incomes (up to a ceiling amount for social benefits).

Although the entrepreneurs propose their own expertise and canvass clients for their own products, they do not have to create a legal structure as it is the cooperative that invoices the clients. Thus, after the first product sale or service delivery, entrepreneurs sign an employee contract. The turnover generated is then transformed into a salary by the cooperative’s shared departments (accounting, management, etc.), staffed by what are known as “permanent employees.” Each entrepreneur has his/her own accountancy within the BEC and his/her salary is smoothed according to his/her anticipated turnover.

In a third phase, the employee-entrepreneurs, like the permanent staff, can participate in the share capital, buying cooperative shares and getting involved in its governance.

Thus, BECs bring together entrepreneurs with various skills who work independently but within an enterprise with shared tax, administrative and accounting departments. They can develop collective entrepreneurial projects and become decision makers. Thus, BECs (re)create solidarity between self-employed people.

This new type of cooperative presents a hybrid status and economic structure. The entrepreneurs are accountable for their own activities; they finance their salaries and social security contributions with their turnover. A share of the turnover (on average around 10%) is used to finance the shared support services (“permanent staff”). As BECs also offer a public interest service by giving advice and help to all those with an entrepreneurial project who contact it, they receive public funds (European funds, local administration funds, etc.).

Although BECs are formally registered as worker cooperatives, they differ from conventional worker cooperatives. Within BECs, each entrepreneur develops his/her own business, workers do not work together on a single production. Moreover, BECs have a high level of turnover due to people entering to test their project.

It is important to mention that this new form of cooperative developed without any specific legal framework until the Social and Solidarity Economy Law voted in July 2014. After more than 20 years of experimentation, this law offers a legal recognition to the BECs and the employee-entrepreneur-members. However, BECs did not wait for this legal recognition to spread throughout the country and there are now around 200 BEC establishments in France with 7000 salaried workers and 3000 project holders with a support contract.<sup>2</sup>

The analysis in the following sections is based on a single holistic case study (Yin, 2003) of a Parisian BEC, Coopaname. This cooperative was established in 2003 and is now one of the biggest BECs in France, with more than 800 members (entrepreneurs with support contract, employee-entrepreneurs, “permanent staff”, etc.), 194 shareholders of whom participate in the share capital, and a turnover of €8 million. Data were collected through three main sources: interviews, focus groups and non-participative observation. Moreover, the cooperative provided open access to its intranet and more than 70 files were collected, comprising annual reports, newsletters, Powerpoint presentations, meeting minutes, press and academic articles, pictures and books. BEC network actors were also interviewed, observed and provided secondary data. The data analysis followed an abductive approach consisting in shuttling back and forth from theory to dataset (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

## **A new-institutional analysis**

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<sup>2</sup> These numbers are an estimation by the French network of worker cooperatives. As BECs can take diverse forms, it is difficult to have accurate statistics.

From a new-institutional approach, BECs rely on three different institutional orders: the market, the state and the social economy.

Institutional orders are: *“different domains of institutions built around a cornerstone institution that represents the cultural symbols and material practices that govern a commonly recognized area of life. Each institutional order represents a governance system that provides a frame of reference that preconditions actors' sensemaking choices”* (Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012, p. 53, inspired by Friedland & Alford, 1991).

Table 1 offers a simplified analytical reading of the three institutional orders upon which BECs were built. Each order encompasses symbolic components - myth and meaning -, which are embodied by material components - practices and instruments.

**Table 1: BECs institutional orders**

Institutional orders		Institutional arrangement		Social economy
		<i>Welfare State</i>		
		Market	State	
Symbolic components	Myth	Market equilibrium	National solidarity	Emancipation
	Meaning	Need for autonomy	Need for protection	Need to be part of a collective
Material components	Practice	Entrepreneurship	Employment	Cooperation
	Instrument	Contract	Labour law and national social insurance	Not-for-profit organizations

Each order relies on a myth or ideal supported by specific meaning linking the myth to human basic needs. The myth underpinning the State is that of a solid national community responding to the need for protection. The Market myth is a natural trading equilibrium responding to the need for autonomy. The social economy relies on the myth of emancipation and the need to be and feel part of a collective. These symbolic components are activated by practices and instruments. The social economy ideal of emancipation is embodied by the creation of not-for-profit organizations (more formal ones, such as non-profit or mutual organizations and cooperatives; and less formal ones, such as social movements, collectives, internet communities, etc.) resulting in various forms of cooperation. The ideal-type of practice promulgated is cooperative work, free of any subordination.

We can observe that this order also includes a part of volunteering to ensure democratic governance. The market ideal regarding labour is embodied in entrepreneurship. All people, as the entrepreneur of their life (time, workforce and capital) are considered free to engage in the market to set up a business or to offer labour and/or capital to an existing enterprise. The ideal type of practice is flexible labour based on the mechanisms of supply and demand. Finally, the state ideal in terms of labour is embodied by employment relationship where the work contract involves mutual rights and responsibilities to guarantee workers a certain level of security.<sup>3</sup>

At societal level, whereas the social economy order has remained marginalized regarding work regulation, both the state and the market have developed under the welfare regime institutional arrangement.<sup>4</sup> The latter provides frameworks and infrastructures for trade to develop and the necessary protection/assets (education, health care, etc.) to ensure good working conditions for employees. Whereas, at first sight, the market and state orders may seem contradictory, the welfare state makes them complementary and interdependent, so that the orders reinforce each other, representing an institutional arrangement (Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013).

However, as presented in the first section, with the socio-economic changes of recent decades, labour has undergone profound changes, destabilizing this welfare regime arrangement. Overall, the economic evolutions have transformed it: from being an institutional arrangement bringing together the state and market orders, it has become a complex environment characterized by competing demands (flexibility versus security), inefficiency (deficit of the national social insurance) and a lack of legitimacy (non-adapted national rules).

Neo-institutional scholars have studied how people and organizations deal with complexity (Greenwood, Raynard, Kodeih, Micelotta, & Lounsbury, 2011; Pache & Santos, 2010; Smets & Jarzabkowski, 2013). They have identified a range of actions, ranging from passive adaptation to active strategizing. One of the major evolutions in this theoretical path is the shift from considering complexity as a threat to considering it as a potential resource (Durand, Szostak, Jourdan, & Thornton, 2013; Zilber, 2011). The multiple components of the institutional orders, considered as united in settled times, are perceived in unsettled-times – when inefficiency, maladjustments,

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<sup>3</sup> Here we are not referring to the civil service, which represents only one particular form of salaried work, but to the approach to labour promoted by the public authorities within society.

<sup>4</sup> However, it is important to highlight that State and Market agents develop many partnerships with actors of the social economy. Thus, some public policies would probably never have developed without the support of the social economy.



conflicts of interest, and crises of legitimacy occur – as potential assets for institutional change (Seo & Creed, 2002; Swidler, 2011).

In these changes of institutional orders, how do actors create new institutional arrangements to face the disruption of the extant ones?

## **SELECTIVE COUPLING AND NEW INSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENT**

### **Selective coupling**

Driven by a desire to offer new solutions to what are now called “grey employment zones” comprising all the precarious forms of work between employment and entrepreneurship that do not benefit from genuine social protection, Coopaname relies on three institutional orders: the state, the market and the social economy. However, the cooperative does not rely on each of them in the same way. The BEC has developed what Pache and Santos (2013) call a “selective coupling” of the different components of the institutional orders. In other words, it chooses among the different institutional orders components to build an original arrangement. This section presents how the BEC selectively couple the three orders.

#### ***The State***

Coopaname relies on the State order to provide its members with some security. Thus, the BEC adheres to the need for protection. However, it has a pragmatic use of the myth of national solidarity and labour laws; in other words, it uses these institutional order components to achieve its goal (secure entrepreneurial path) while being aware of their limits. More precisely, although Coopaname is aware that the myth of national solidarity is vanishing and that labour laws have failed to adapt to the new socio-economic conditions, it relies on them because, even though they are far from perfect, they provide some security. Finally, Coopaname uses an existing employment form but also advocates for emancipated work relations released from subordination. Therefore, by using the existing employment form while trying to transform it, the BEC is manipulating this institutional order component. The quote below illustrates this complex relationship to employment.

*"Worker cooperatives in the 19th century were built upon a call to end submissive employment, thought of as an expropriation of the working tool. At Coopaname we consider ourselves as part of this history and endeavour to go beyond an alienating type of relation to labour, which is alienating, dumb, violent, and seems to us to be completely incompatible with the necessary evolution of the*

economy. While we are awaiting and calling for this evolution , we paradoxically are completely committed to salaried employment, being still the only framework where we can find social protection, rights, and real solidarity [...]" (Coopaname Welcome booklet)

Table 2 summarises the evolution of the State institutional order in society as a whole and the way Coopaname uses its symbolic and material components.

**Table 2: State institutional order, societal evolution and how Coopaname uses these concepts**

State Institutional order		Societal evolution		Coopaname use
Symbolic components	Myth	National solidarity	Inefficiency and decreasing legitimacy	Pragmatic use
	Meaning	Need for protection	In movement: national and local mechanisms	Adherence
Material components	Practice	Employment	Transformation and diversification of statuses (grey employment zones)	Manipulation
	Instrument	Labour law and national social insurance	Only small incremental changes – Lack of adaptation	Pragmatic use

### **The Market**

The BEC also relies on the market order. It recognises people’s need for autonomy so that entrepreneurs deliver their products or services under their own brand, and their salary depends on their turnover. However, Coopaname is highly critical of the myth of market self-balance and the “heroic” approach of the entrepreneur as a self-made-(wo)man. This approach, which is largely disseminated in society and is linked to the need for autonomy, sometimes takes the form of an injunction. One of the most symbolic forms of this injunction in France is the new status of “*auto-entrepreneur*” (self-entrepreneur), established to encourage jobless people to create their own job by setting up their own business. Whereas this status facilitates procedures (simplified administrative tasks, tax advantages, etc.), it does not provide the new entrepreneurs with the necessary skills and does not protect them against isolation.

Thus, Coopaname relies on the need for autonomy by using entrepreneurship and contracting but in a manipulative way with the intent to transform them. The aim of the cooperative is to move from an

individualized and risky approach to entrepreneurship to a more collective and less precarious one as illustrated by the following quote.

*"The generalization of political decisions to support entrepreneurship, led by policy-makers towards increasingly smaller projects, held by people who are less and less prepared socially, professionally and financially to succeed in their enterprise constitutes a solution to unemployment only in as much as it pushes an increasing number of people out of the employee category. [...] the micro entrepreneur appears, beyond the myth, as a new emblematic figure of precariousness: his/her micro-enterprise allows him/her to earn a micro-income that allows him/her to reimburse his/her micro-credit and to access micro social protection..."* (Article written by Coopaname members and published in academic journal)

Table 3 summarises the societal evolution of the Market order and how Coopaname uses it.

**Table 3: Market institutional order, societal evolution and Coopaname use**

Market institutional order		Societal evolution	Coopaname use	
Symbolic components	Myth	Market equilibrium	Increasing legitimacy and use	Criticism
	Meaning	Need for autonomy	Increasing legitimacy and use	Manipulation
Material components	Practice	Entrepreneurship	Increasing legitimacy and use	Manipulation
	Instrument	Contract	Development and diversification (e.g. "auto-entrepreneur" status)	Manipulation

### ***The Social Economy***

Finally, the BEC relies on the social economy order. It adheres to the myth of emancipation through labour. Thus, all members can develop their own skills according to their aspirations, combine different professions, etc. The cooperative also adheres to the need to be part of a collective through cooperation. It develops a strong community culture through friendly events, such as potlucks, or with a specific and humoristic vocabulary: for example, members call themselves "Coopanamians".

Cooperation among members takes diverse forms. The entrepreneurs mutualise the support activities (accounting, etc.) but they are also encouraged to create groups to share advice or even set up collective businesses. Furthermore, the BEC develops many tools and events to spread information and offers appropriate training to allow members to speak out and take part in debates, be they are co-operators or not yet.

As a cooperative, Coopaname relies on the cooperative principles as per the 1995 Statement on the cooperative identity of the International Cooperative Alliance. However, the BEC appears very critical of the cooperative movement and more broadly of the social economy movement. In fact, Coopaname deplores the fact that the social economy has acquired economic recognition but has failed to construct a unified political movement. When the new French social economy bill was being debated in parliament, Coopaname welcomed the news with an opinion column in a national newspaper calling for the social economy “*of good causes*” to be replaced by the social economy “*of struggle*”. For the authors, “*what is at stake is not the size or institutional recognition, but the disastrous lack of a political project shared by social economy organizations to sustain the whole economy. [...] We must replace the issue of employment by that of labour: we have to assume that the mission of the social economy is not simply to create employment, but to develop new forms of labour that will provide a bigger contribution to developing tomorrow’s society than a thousand social integration firms.*”

Behind this sentence, one has to remember that the government has used social economy organizations (mainly with charitable status) greatly to enforce job creation policies through funding, specific contracts or a new organization status. From the Coopaname viewpoint, this *instrumentalization* to create new jobs or foster entrepreneurship seems to have separated the material components of the social economy – not-for-profit organizations and cooperation practices - from its symbolic components - the myth of emancipation and the need to be part of a collective.

Therefore, the BEC appears to have a manipulative use of the social economy instruments as stated here by the former co-director of Coopaname:

*“I think that, within five years there will be no more old-style BECs. I think tomorrow’s question is: how will completely new types of social organization be born within the grey employment zones. The BEC is preparing the ground. Such organizations do not have to be cooperatives; they could be mutuals or unions.”*

Table 4 summarizes the relations Coopaname developed with the Social Economy order.

**Table 4: Social economy order, societal evolution and Coopaname use**

Social economy institutional orders			Societal evolution	Coopaname use
<b>Symbolic components</b>	Myth	Emancipation	Increasing	Adherence
	Meaning	Need to be part of a collective	Increasing	Adherence
<b>Material components</b>	Practice	Cooperation	Development of some new uses (e.g. collaborative economy)	Adherence
	Instrument	Not-for-profit organizations	Increasing legitimacy but still marginal	Manipulation

### **Building a new institutional arrangement**

Facing the disruption of the welfare institutional arrangement, BECs aim to build a new one providing the growing number of self-employed people with a securing collective framework and democratic economic relationships. To do so, they are building a new institutional arrangement through the selective coupling of three institutional orders: the market, the state and the social economy. The case of Coopaname highlights different ways of selectively coupling institutional order components, ranging from adherence to criticism through pragmatic use and manipulation. Two main transversal dimensions play a key role in the building of the new institutional arrangement: the meso-level social innovation dynamic and the cooperative principle of education, training and information.

#### ***A meso level social innovation dynamic***

By combining the components of three different institutional orders, the cooperative entails a social innovation dynamic. A process aiming at improving social conditions and generating institutional changes that involves a diversity of stakeholders in an empowerment approach (Bouchard, Evers, & Fraise, 2015; Mulgan, Tucker, Rushanara, & Sanders, 2007; Terstriep, Kleverbeck, Deserti, & Rizzo, 2015; Westley, Antadze, Riddell, Robinson, & Geobey, 2014).

Indeed, as the following quote highlights it, more than a new organizational form, the BEC is a dynamic:

*"[...] there is a project that is utopian, there is a structure that is in constant evolution but is still unfinished."* (Co-director)

The meso or intermediary level of the dynamic, between people's needs and aspirations at micro level and the disruption of welfare state at macro level, is highly important. Indeed, at this level, the cooperative can experiment with the institutional orders available in an innovative and pragmatic way, which appears legitimate to both workers and policy makers.

To reach this position Coopaname has built partnerships with other cooperatives sharing the same objectives as stated in the following quote.

*"[...] our interest is to have a cooperative group of structures working in the field of grey employment zones. [...] The general idea behind it is: what united us, as cooperatives, is the notion of social protection, general protection; when we say social protection, we mean mutuality."* (Former co-director)

### ***Education, training and information***

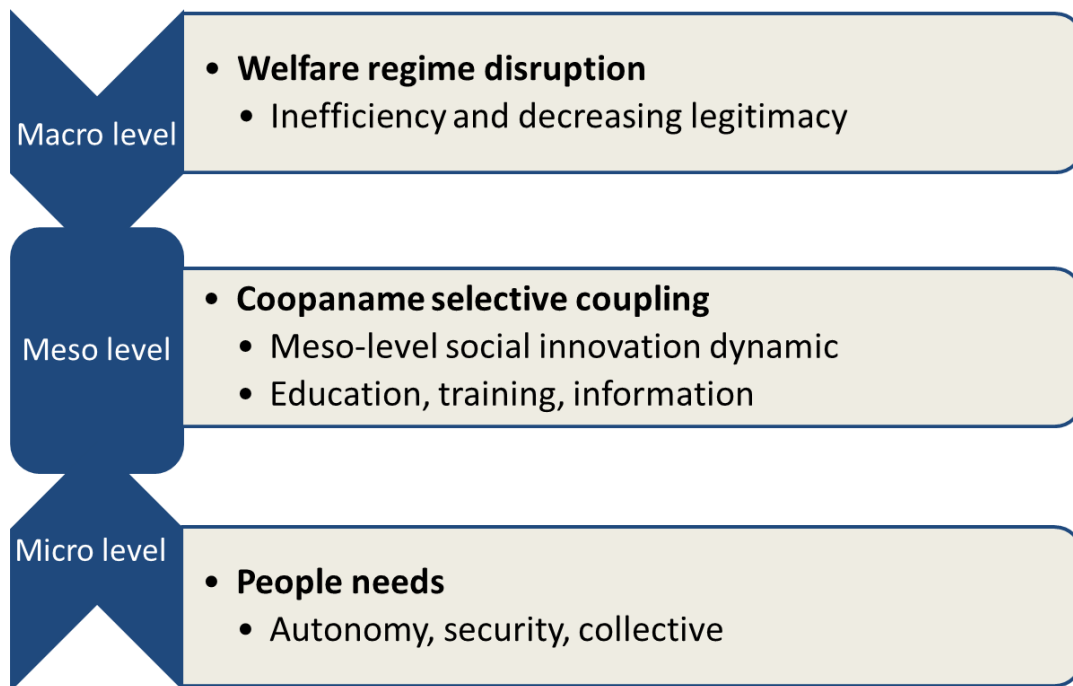
Another important dimension of the creation of the new institutional arrangement is the cooperative principle of *education, training and information*. Indeed, the social innovation dynamic relies heavily on this principle and Coopaname develops numerous times and spaces to foster it.

The BEC and its partners have publicised their social innovation through public talks, press interviews and even research papers. Quite early after its creation, the cooperative has created a group of research-action. This group that first gathered members who had more or less experience with research gave birth to partnerships with different scholars and laboratories developing projects to improve and theorise social innovation dynamics (economic model, mutual entrepreneurial support, gender equality and so on).

Moreover, the cooperative does not consider reflexivity to be reserved to a small number of its members. Therefore, according to the fifth cooperative principle, it has developed multiple tools to encourage its member to take an active part in the social innovation process: annual universities, internal training sessions bringing together all members to discuss the cooperative's latest concerns, set of documents presenting the cooperative, its history and specific vocabulary in a very instructive and humorous way. Thus, the cooperative spreads what can be called a "critical economic culture".

Figure 1 summarises the process through which the BEC is building a new institutional arrangement with the top-down – welfare regime disruption - and bottom-up – people needs and aspirations - pressures.

**Figure 1: The building of a new institutional arrangement**



## **CONCLUSION**

The study of the Coopaname case highlights how, in a context of institutional arrangement disruption, a new arrangement can be created by selectively coupling different institutional orders. This resonates and completes new institutional research showing that institutional orders, or logics at field level, can represent strategic resources (Durand et al., 2013).

This case also presents interesting insights for the cooperative movement.

First, it highlights the crucial role played by the fifth cooperative principle of *education, training and information*. A principle quite overlooked by scholars who tend to focus prevalently on cooperative governance and economic structure. More than just a means or a principle to conform to, this principle is the cornerstone of the BEC project. Coopaname enacts this principle through dedicated training, specific times for debate such as the annual universities or research groups. All these tools enhance critical thinking and aim to improve the institutional arrangement under construction. This represents an interesting insight for cooperatives as one of their pressing issue is to preserve their social goal and democratic functioning over time in a context dominated by for-profit organizations

(Cornforth, 1995; Draperi, 2012). Furthermore, people's motivations for entering the BEC are very diverse – better life balance, flexibility, autonomy, etc. – with some of them facing “personal hardship” - long term unemployed, difficult career change, etc. Although the BEC offers a new form of work, this one is no panacea; however the culture of constant and democratic reflexivity appears to strengthen the trust and confidence which workers have in their BEC.

Secondly, whereas worker cooperatives mainly focus on a single production, BECs rely on diversity, opening their doors to all occupations, as long as they are not submitted to specific regulations. This is an interesting feature in a context of deep transformation of labour where workers have multiple jobs, different employers/clients and even different statuses. Thus, production no longer appears to be the catalyst gathering people who simply contract on a project mode. This raises questions about the definition of the enterprise - be it a cooperative or not - and why/how people create new collectives. In the BEC case, people come together because they share common needs and aspirations: the willingness to build professional projects within a flexi-secured framework.

Thirdly, by opening their doors almost unconditionally, BECs serve the interests not only of their members but also of society as a whole. Exceeding their organizational boundaries by positioning themselves as servants of society or “supra-configuration missionaries” (Malo & Vézina, 2004), the BECs offer to rethink the economy. The boundaries between the public and private economy blur to give rise to a “collective economy”, where enterprises work “through economic democracy to the public interest” (Draperi, 2012).

To sum up, this new cooperative form calls for a renewal of cooperation among working people by

- (1) reconsidering cooperatives not just as organizational forms but as social innovation instrument;
- (2) going back to the initial political project of emancipation through education and self-organizing;
- (3) blurring the boundaries between collective and public interests.



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