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# Bringing democracy to life in cooperatives: ongoing experiments. The cases of Railcoop and SmartCoop

## Authors:

- Justine Ballon, Assistant Professor, HEC Montréal and member of Railcoop
- Thomas Blondeel, Project manager at Smart, and member of SmartCoop
- Marius Chevallier, Lecturer at the University of Limoges, Geolab, and member of Railcoop
- Orville Pletschette, Head of continuing education at APMC-Smart, and member of SmartCoop

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## Abstract

This paper examines the democratic governance of large cooperatives (in terms of number of members) through the prism of systems and practices designed to strengthen member participation. We compare the evolution of formal and informal mechanisms supporting the dynamics of participative democracy at Railcoop and SmartCoop. This research is based on an ongoing action-research based on statistics and qualitative data. It sheds light on their practices, the tensions encountered and the experiments undertaken to reduce them. This working paper puts into perspective the initial results of a descriptive and comparative analysis of two schemes designed to increase member participation: circles at Railcoop and the Smart in Progress process at SmartCoop. In this respect, we demonstrate the importance of ongoing reflexivity on our practices, through surveys, collective writing, and spaces conducive to critical and contradictory discussions, provided this is done in a constructive and transparent manner. Beyond this, we show the value of highlighting the 5th and 6th principles of ICA - education, training and information on the one hand, and intercooperation on the other - between two cooperatives sharing issues relating to governance and democratic participation.

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**Key-words** : cooperatives, democracy, participation, experimentation, action-research

## Introduction

Democratic governance in a social economy organization can be defined as a mode of governance by the members that is based on : the equality of voting members (regardless of their financial contribution), the accountability of governance bodies, and democratic rules and practices based on participation and transparency (Barthoulot and Fahmy, 2022). Member participation in democratic governance is a long-standing and recurring thorny issue in cooperatives, particularly those of large size, especially in terms of membership (Caire, 2010; Draperi, 2012 ; Rijpens et al., 2015). Several studies argue that large organizations may degenerate with the introduction of more hierarchical leadership and the pre-eminence of economic objectives (Meister, 1974). This is a particular difficulty for big cooperatives (Cornforth, 1995). Although many articles have focused on this issue in cooperative banks in the 2010s, attesting to a trivialization (low member participation), they retain a democratic specificity - unequal - by their organizational form, practices and collective values of the membership (Gianfaldoni et al., 2012; Caire and Nivoix, 2012). The difficulties of maintaining a dynamic democracy - with an effective participation of a majority of members in the construction and decision-making - remain an important issue in large cooperatives, even in the digital age (video, chat, internal social networks in cooperatives). Recent articles argue that it is necessary to go beyond the analysis of democratic governance in terms of principles to understand the practices that promote informed and active participation (Richez-Battesti & Oswald, 2010 ; Bonnemaizon et al., 2019). It is in this spirit that this research was carried out.

While the question of how to nurture dynamics conducive to participatory democracy in large cooperatives has already been the subject of much research and publication, we propose to approach it by considering the practices of permanent reflexivity implemented in two large cooperatives. In Europe, SmartCoop (autonomous workers cooperative, Belgium, since 1998<sup>1</sup>) and Railcoop (freight and passenger transport, France, since 2019) are two large cooperatives, with respectively 35.000 and 14.000 members. One of their current challenges? Ensuring the participation in democratic governance of their members in line with their political project and their economic development strategy. However, the interest in studying these two co-operatives also lies in their unique multi-stakeholder singularity, which makes them potentially 'powerful tools for experimenting with economic democracy' (Bonnemaizon et al. 2019, p. 67).

Because there is always a difficulty in managing the gaps between the discourse that conveys strong democratic expectations and everyday practices, which are necessarily the result of obstacles and compromises, generating disappointment. For example, the democratic spaces created are not always functional, and this generates tensions. This is an important issue at Railcoop and SmartCoop, as it is a source of tension. With a view to training, education and inter-cooperation, Railcoop and SmartCoop are keen to document, question and compare their practices and to analyze them from a distance in order to better understand internal social dynamics. This may also enable us to share our SmartCoop and Railcoop experiments more widely with other cooperatives, in a spirit of popular education.

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<sup>1</sup> Cooperative since 2018 after 30 years as a non-profit association.

In this paper, we seek to answer the following question : beyond the principles and statutes, how can participation in the democratic life, transparency in decision-making and the process of co-construction of decisions in large multi-member cooperatives be made to work? Following a reflexive logic, this paper is part of a social investigation and action research approach on the respective practices of Railcoop and SmartCoop. We present the first results of an ongoing exploratory research. From a comparative perspective, this case study (Yin, 1983; Dumez, 2013) aims to distance itself from the practices, with attention to the possible gaps between democratic intention and its concrete realization, its potential biases and source of tensions. This working paper is divided into four parts. We present an initial theoretical framework, before outlining our research approach and the two cases studied. After presenting the intermediate results of the descriptive analysis, we compare the practices of Railcoop and SmartCoop, and conclude by discussing our results and their limitations.

## 1. Theoretical framework

Democracy can be defined as a political regime covering a set of rules, procedures and institutions guaranteeing government of, by and for member policyholders (Bonnemaizon et al., 2019). In Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE), democratic governance is one of its three constitutive pillars, along with the limitation of profit-making and social utility. In France, this rule is enshrined as early as Article 1 paragraph 2 of the Hamon law of July 31, 2014, thus showing the importance given to it: "democratic governance defined and organized by the bylaws, providing for information and participation, the expression of which is not solely linked to their capital contribution or the timing of their financial contributions of associates, employees and stakeholders in the company's achievements." But beyond its statutory dimension, it requires the implementation of mechanisms, processes and training to enable participation in so-called democratic governance. That's where the problem lies. In this paper, we consider democratic governance beyond participation in the General Meeting (GM), which can take various forms of deliberation, discussion and decision-making (Draperi et al., 2009). In this way, cooperatives - which are part of the SSE - differ in particular from for-profit companies, in that they promote actors' power to act on organizational and institutional rules (Celle, 2020). In this section, we begin by reviewing the state of the art on democracy and cooperatives (1.1.), before focusing on the specific democratic features of SCICs (1.2.). This leads us to propose an analytical prism explored in this paper: the challenge of continuous reflection and experimentation as fuel for a democratic and participative dynamic.

### 1.1. Cooperatives & democracy

The question of democracy or democratic governance is one of the themes regularly addressed in the literature (Ripjens et al., 2015), particularly in agricultural cooperatives (Courret, 2012 ; Valiorgue & Hollandts, 2020) and banking cooperatives (Caire et Nivoix, 2012), and to a lesser extent in workers' cooperatives (Demoustier, 1981 ; Defourny, 1990), and more recently in

multistakeholder cooperatives (Becuwe et al., 2014 ; Béji-Bécheur et al., 2017 ; Bonnemaizon et al., 2019 ; Lanciano et Saleilles, 2020). Among the main subjects studied, cooperative degeneration (related to age and size) (Meister, 1974 ; Maroudas & Rizopoulos, 2014), the relationship between democracy and economic efficiency (Defourny, 1990) and the members' participation (Caire et Chevallier, 2017) occupy an important place. Far from proposing an exhaustive review of the literature, this section highlights several key elements (due to their redundancy in the literature and their direct relevance to our subject) for understanding the creation and maintenance of sustainable democratic and participative governance.

The democratic ambition of cooperatives is not merely economic, or a question of management, focused on efficiency and stability (Braconnier & Caire, 2009). « It is much more ambitious; it is not just a means, but also an end in itself, with reference to socio-political values and a project to promote the human being (empowerment), fulfillment through reflection and participation in the life of the City. » (ibid. para. 52). While they must necessarily reconcile an objective of economic efficiency with democratic governance, the former must not supplant the latter. For all that, economic efficiency and democratic governance must be considered together (Demoustier, 1981 ; Defourny, 1990). Thus, for Gianfaldoni et al. (2012), the democratic specificity of cooperatives implies, « a triple rationality: legal, economic and social ». Maroudas and Rizopoulos (2014, pp. 81-82) also stress the importance of emphasizing the cooperative's mission and ideology to ensure its viability and the preservation of its democratic functioning. Rather, it's a matter of thinking in terms of cooperative culture (the cooperative project) in order to think in terms of economic democracy (Manucoop, 2014), in other words, to base the codification of organizational rules on the cooperative's political project. However, they evolve in a hostile system that is unfavourable to this dynamic (Cornforth, 2004).

« The evolution of production cooperatives in a hostile environment results in permanent pressures that contribute to the weakening of their cohesion and tendencies towards their degeneration. » (Maroudas and Rizopoulos, 2014, p. 81). One of the challenges for cooperatives thus lies in their ability to ensure the participation of their members as they develop and grow, as this often leads to a greater division of labor and the differentiation of roles and skills, particularly with managerial roles (Cornforth, 1995). In wine cooperatives, for example, Couret (2002) finds that democratic practices are rather weak, and that the use of the democratic principle is very uneven. The organization of the decision-making process relies mainly on the participation of directors, who make the bulk of strategic decisions, while the entire decision-making process is carried out by a few board members. To deal with the complexity and tensions inherent in governance in cooperatives, Braconnier and Caire (2009) identify two categories of challenge. The first is to ensure that the cooperative project - translated into participatory rules and processes - is shared by all stakeholders. The second concerns the ability to maintain participative governance, combining direct and representative democracy, to meet the contrasting expectations of members as the size of the cooperative increases.

While the deterministic thesis of degeneration considered inevitable in these organizations (Webb and Webb, 1897; Meister, 1974) has been called into question (Cornforth, 1995), the recurring specific tensions running through cooperatives cannot be denied (Cornforth, 2004; Pache and

Santos, 2010). Bretos et al. (2019) show just how difficult the evolution of a cooperative can be, looking at the life cycles of Mondragon, demonstrating the simplistic nature of the degeneration thesis. In fact, degeneration and regeneration can occur simultaneously, and can even lead to long-lasting and insoluble situations, inviting us to better appreciate power relationships in order to better understand how cooperatives manage tensions at each organizational stage of their life cycle. To control the risks of degeneration, the implementation of "mechanisms that promote horizontal exchanges and interactions and, more generally, consolidate the cooperative ideology and develop collective intelligence: rethinking decision-making processes, redefining the division of labor, facilitating access to relevant information for all, applying the immediate revocability of delegates, reducing salary inequalities" (Maroudas & Rizopoulos, 2014, pp. 81-82)

In banking cooperatives, the discrepancies between existing democratic and participatory arrangements and member expectations have regularly been documented. To assess the strength of participation, Caire & Nivoix (2012) take up the democratic principles of cooperatives (free and responsible membership, equal voting rights, participation in management (attendance at AGMs, exercise of democratic power, candidacy for directorships and disinterestedness of elected representatives). To assess the strength of participation, they look in particular at the number of members, the ratio of members to directors, the rate of participation in AGMs and the average number of participants in an AGM. They propose an analytical grid of evaluation criteria relating to participation (particularly in AGMs), management and the exercise of democratic power. Caire and Nivoix find AGM participation rates (between 1.5% and 7%) equivalent to those usually found in the literature (ranging from 1% to 8%, depending on the type of cooperative).

Efforts to increase low attendance at AGMs have not always met the expectations of all members, who see them more as a place for information than for exchange (Caire and Nivoix, 2012; Caire and Chevallier, 2017). In economic and legal terms, cooperative banks tend to follow a trajectory of trivialization that can be explained by the logic of competitive isomorphism, reducing their democratic potential all the more. Nevertheless, Gianfaldoni et al. (2019, para. 33) show that they continue to maintain, « a democratic specificity that they draw from the maintenance of original structural forms of organization and administration, as well as from the practices and collective values of the membership. » If it is possible to guarantee a democratic government based in particular on local cooperative entities, the democratic exercise must nevertheless go beyond the formal foundations of representative democracy. Gianfaldoni et al. (2012) identify two challenges. First, there is the creation of « instituted places of collective deliberation favoring participatory democracy and the association of members at different levels of decision-making .» Then there's the ability to ensure the voluntary commitment of member-policyholders, as a constitutive vector of a democratic identity consistent with « the cooperative project and the implementation of economic actions with high societal utility value externally. »

The literature highlights several specific issues in large cooperatives and democratic organizations. Looking at the management of tensions linked to the differentiation of roles and skills in an organization with over a hundred members, Ghent (2015) identifies the tension linked to the differentiation of knowledge and skills between members, which can lead to a risk of democratic governance falling apart. The result is the need to design a set of adapted

management systems capable of organizing the circulation of knowledge and learning (individual and collective) necessary for the exercise of plural governance, which the author refers to as "cognitive governance" (ibid. P. 140). Caire (2012) underlines the difficulty of applying cooperative principles, such as free membership, equal voting rights, free participation in management and the absence of the profit motive on the part of elected representatives - and also the absence of debate on the construction of an alternative project to capitalist financial operation.

For Côté (2004), cooperative cohesion and democratic functioning are the keys to managing a large cooperative. While democratic functioning refers to statutory rules, three levels of cooperative cohesion are interwoven: associative cohesion (between members), association-business cohesion and strategic cohesion. Developing and maintaining these three levels of cohesion ensures cooperative equilibrium, supported by a democratic structure that enables issues to be debated with members. To achieve this, cooperative education enables members to acquire the « expertise » to assume their responsibilities and express cohesive points of view, based on a sufficient understanding of the cooperative's strategic issues. It's a question of thinking through both the structure and the process (and its legitimacy), especially in the context of a strategic consultation, for example, to enable us to go beyond the expression of ideas and identify majority currents of opinion from which concrete actions can be derived.

With regard to participation more specifically, the literature provides us with several analytical keys for thinking about democratic governance. Dellier and Chevallier (2011) clearly demonstrate the tension between formal democracy and practice. While the articles of association and technical participatory mechanisms help to limit the concentration of power and facilitate its distribution in accordance with democratic principles, informal power relations nonetheless undermine equal democratic participation. Based on the case of a SCOP, Juban (2019) describes a distribution of power that makes it difficult for employee members to really exercise the oversight (counter-power) that falls to them in the face of the sovereign power exercised by the board of directors and the executive power of the management committee. Nevertheless, he stresses the importance of the cooperative project as a means of balancing and linking aspirations for social justice and democracy, on the one hand, and a viable economic project on the other.

Comparing cooperatives and mutuals, Caire and Chevallier (2017) consider the usefulness of regularly renewing member-policyholder engagement modalities to maintain active participation in democratic governance. This would mean moving towards multiple forms of participation adapted to different member profiles, since the general meeting appears insufficient to meet the democratic expectations of a heterogeneous group of members. The same observation is made by Allemand et al. (2021). To maintain a participative democracy, cooperatives face the challenge of adapting forms of participation to member profiles and, if necessary, evolving the cooperative project to ensure medium/end consistency. In fact, some members are satisfied with representative democracy, while others are looking for more participatory spaces that are more akin to deliberative and participative democracy, or even direct democracy.

To consider the democratic balance specific to cooperatives, it is useful to consider Desroche's quadrilateral (1976), which distinguishes four angles symbolizing the populations of managers, administration (board of directors), employees and members. This diagram shows how these

population categories, as well as internal projects and functions, can contribute to the democratic equilibrium of a structure (Cariou, 2021). For Gianfaldoni et al. (2009), for Desroches' quadrilateral to be effective with all its components, « cooperative reinvention must rest on three pillars [...] with a certain order and without excluding back-and-forth movements ». Firstly, training is essential to ensure that members and directors are able to exercise their constituent power with the necessary qualifications, in addition to strengthening cohesion between members and readapting the collective representation of the cooperative project (Coté, 2004), following Desroche's insistence on cooperative education). Braconnier & Caire (2009, par. 52) see cooperatives as "a veritable school of democracy". Secondly, the self-understanding of cooperative groups needs to be developed. The last point is the creation of a body of rules, charters and statutes adapted to the needs of the cooperative.

Finally, we note the importance attached in the literature to the political construction of the cooperative project, both historical and evolving, as part of a process of cooperative education. If cooperatives wish to give themselves the means to achieve their democratic ambitions, they must "succeed in reconciling heritage [history, principles and values, member communities] with open, renewed and creative adaptation" (Gianfaldoni et al. 2012). The authors emphasize two crucial points in thinking about this participatory democracy: as a component of the cooperative project, democracy « only exists if it is reflected in the day-to-day practices of its stakeholders » and « the implementation of a new cooperative project will be collective, multidisciplinary and also pluristatutory in that it will bring together member-policyholders, employees and managers, scientists and beneficiaries .» In other words, maintaining democracy requires an ongoing reflexive and critical process: « Cooperatives need to be able to question themselves and their practices. « To achieve this, they need to take a regular time for evaluation and collective reflection, to ensure a shared vision of the cooperative project, nurture the cooperative dynamic and actively involve stakeholders in thinking about the overall operation. This collective reflection will help maintain the cooperative ideal and the democratic vitality of our cooperatives. » (Rijpens, et al., 2015).

« Cooperatives are looking for ways to reduce the decision-making costs (time, and conflict in particular). To do that, they use different forms of democratic processes—direct, deliberative, or representative democracy (delegate system, or trustee)—as well as decision-making rules (majority decision, decisions by consent, consensus, proxy voting, and so on). Schemes offered by sociocratic (dynamic governance) rules and processes of effective decision-making in flat, interconnected circles are on the rise in worker cooperatives and collectives (see the case of Unicorn Grocery, McMahon et al., 2021; also McNamara, Chapter 5 in this volume). The appeal is in the facilitated meetings, double-linking of circles to ensure information flows between different layers in the organization, and consent as a rule, speeding up the decision-making process (Buck & Villines, 2007; Rau & Koch-Gonzalez, 2018). »

« The more participatory the processes, the more dynamic will be the governance systems. Holacracy (Robertson, 2015) and sociocracy (Rau & Koch-Gonzalez, 2018) both provide tools for operational changes through a democratic process that can result, fairly quickly, in rules changes instigated from bottom-up in the organization. These practices are a good fit for participatory cooperative enterprises, particularly those with insider-members—although governance circles



(Rau & Koch-Gonzalez, 2018) may include diverse stakeholders, both internal and external to the organization. »

To summarize these initial elements of the literature review, we have identified the importance of thinking about democratic governance, with a particular focus on the practices and mechanisms that foster participation. Secondly, there is the need to understand the cooperative project as a democratic system, which, in order to maintain a participative dynamic, relies on the creation of spaces for discussion and deliberation, in addition to ongoing education processes, to ensure that the project is passed on, but also that it evolves.

## 1.2. Focus on SCIC: from bylaws to democratic organization

In addition to its limited profit-making potential, the singularity of the multistakeholder cooperatives, lies in its multi-partnership, since it associates different stakeholders around a common object. They are particularly interesting organizational forms to study, in that they are experimental laboratories for economic and political democracy (Gomez and Korine, 2009). By associating several stakeholders, rather than just one (e.g., the employee partners[1] of cooperative and participative societies, or the beneficiaries of an association) (Lipietz, 2001), the multistakeholder cooperatives makes it possible for users, employees and public authorities to become shareholders. In SCICs, « multi-partnership is [their] *raison d'être*, [their] main driving force, [their] very essence. » (Draperi and Margado, 2016, p. 29). The multistakeholder cooperative status thus gives rise to "a new form of multistakeholder governance targeting a collective interest" (Béji-Bécheur et al., 2016, p.34), following variable configurations to integrate the interests of each college of members, characteristic of hybrid governance (Cornforth, 2004). Beyond democracy, in multistakeholder, we find systems and practices inspired by shared governance, including holacracy or sociocracy, aimed at strengthening the participative and democratic dynamics of people, beyond cooperative principles and statutory rules (e.g., one person, one vote) (Maître, 2021; Ollivier and Rospabé, 2021).

While multistakeholder cooperatives are characterized by their democratic potential, they are not exempt from difficulties and challenges in terms of participation and democratic governance. Social economy literature has regularly examined the gaps between intentions and actual democratic dynamics (Celle, 2020; Chevallier & Dellier, 2020; Chevallier, 2018). These multi-member cooperatives face an additional difficulty, compared to single-member cooperatives (e.g. consumer cooperatives): they associate several categories of members with diverging interests (Margado, 2002; Becuwe et al., 2014; Béji-Bécheur et al., 2016). Based on the case of the SCIC Enercoop, Becuwe et al. (2014) show that the statutory rule of equality between stakeholders is not sufficient in the face of underlying power inequalities between colleges. Furthermore, Eynaud (2019) highlights the ambivalent effects of statutes that are supposed to guarantee multistakeholder governance, such as the difficulty of associating stakeholders with divergent interests, the sharing of information within the organization, the risk of misunderstanding between members leading to tensions, or the ineffectiveness of rules aimed at democratic decision-making. So, while multi-partnership is « the driving force and strength » of the SCIC, it is also its greatest weakness, and SCICs have disappeared for failing to manage their membership. Indeed,

it is not uncommon for the initial mobilization that underpins the creation of a multistakeholder cooperative to fizzle out after one, two or three years » (Draperi and Margado, 2016, p. 29).

One of the challenges facing multistakeholder cooperatives concerns their ability to work out compromises around a « diversity of representations [which] also testifies [to] the fragility of democratic balances [...] and the need for ongoing work to nurture, reconfigure and preserve democracy. » (Bonnemaizon et al., p. 72) The strength of SCICs lies in their ability to « constantly reinvent themselves, based on learning from past experience, but also on an extensive and intermediated conception of democratic processes » (Lanciano et al., 2014, p. 21). Beyond the abstract nature of the democratic principle, it is important to focus on building democracy in concrete day-to-day activities through « rules, devices and practices that organize members' participation and empowerment by constantly attempting to thwart the determinism associated with collective action » (Lanciano & al., 2014, p. 22). This also implies the ability of members to shape their own management tools to guarantee the sustainability of their social transformation project. As with cooperatives in general, the challenge lies in effective, active member participation. However, SCICs also have a variety of participation desires. Bonnemaizon et al. (2019) suggest two strategies for dealing with this: try to make all members want to participate, or accept that only some of them should be involved in the democratic project. The ways in which these tools are constructed are thus fundamental, insofar as they constitute « symbolic, rhetorical objects and carriers of societal ideal material » (Château-Terrisse, 2015). If we regard democracy in SCICs as an « indeterminate regime, never fully completed » (Bonnemaizon et al., p. 70), then its maintenance relies on the organizations' ability to maintain « a permanent reflexive dynamic and the capacity of members to question and debate the choices made » (ibid, p.72).

The multistakeholder cooperative is therefore a tool capable of strengthening a broader democracy around a productive activity rooted in a territory albeit under certain conditions. Indeed, beyond the necessary but insufficient principles, statutes and regulatory texts, it is also a question of thinking about their evolution, as recommended by the *Conseil Supérieur à l'Économie Sociale et Solidaire in France* (CSESS, 2017). While the legal formula 'one person = one vote in the general assembly' is convenient, as it is common to all SSE organizations (Caire & Chevallier, 2017; Caire & Nivoix, 2012), it is nonetheless very reductive and does not say much about actual practices (Lanciano & al., 2014; Chevallier, 2018; Chevallier & Dellier, 2020). That's why it's important to take an interest in the construction of this democracy involving these different stakeholders. However, "democratic enterprises" (Gand and Segrestin, 2009) are more « [projects] of collective action whose realization can take various forms and transform over time » (Lanciano & alii., 2014, p. 7). These authors (2014, p. 7) consider that a « collective democratic enterprise [...] would then be characterized not by its principles, but by its capacity to create new social norms of collective and democratic exchange ». Participatory democracy in SCICs is an ongoing process of construction and regular reconfiguration. Practices are shaped by spaces, time and participation tools adapted to the aspirations of the heterogeneous community of member-policyholders. To support this ongoing dynamic, Bonnemaizon et al. (2019, para. 63) also emphasize "the importance of a permanent reflexive dynamic and the ability of members to question and debate the choices made," made possible by training in cooperation and participation feeding into a policy of integrating new members, with a logic of inclusion "to give a

place to the 'laymen', the 'non-learners' ". It is indeed this institute/institute dialogue that Henri Desroche (1985) emphasized in his time. It's a question of thinking and conceiving participatory democracy in relation to the question of cooperation (Draperi et al., 2009).

Beyond the normative efficiency-oriented perspective of the orthodox institutionalist approach on democratic governance, Richez-Battesti and Oswald (2010, p. 32) recommend studying, « the way in which the 'doing together' between different stakeholders is constructed and reconstructed ». Following Bonnemaizon et al. (2020), our research focuses on the manufacture of democracy, i.e., understanding its concrete implementation. More specifically, we are studying participatory democracy in multistakeholder cooperatives, understood as the set of mechanisms and procedures that increase member involvement in the democratic life (notably decision-making processes) of the cooperative (Gaudin, 2007). We focus our analysis on the mechanisms, processes, tools and management practices that promote active member participation in democratic governance, considering their coherent articulation with a cooperative project and cooperative principles and values. Following a dynamic perspective of participatory democracy, we consider in particular a crucial element recurrently highlighted in the literature: training, collective evaluation and reflection. This research is part of an action-research methodology which aims to nurture democracy in two multistakeholder cooperatives.

## 2. Research approach and cases presentation

This exploratory research is part of an original approach to knowledge production: cooperative action research. After introducing our unique approach (2.1.), we present each case study (2.2.).

### 2.1. Research approach

Our research approach is based on an action research (AR) (2.1.1.), in the form of a comparative case study, using statistical and qualitative data (2.1.2.), which we analyzed in several steps (2.1.3.).

#### 2.1.1. An action research in the form of analytical self-reflection

Our action-research approach is directly linked to a well-established tradition in the social economy (Draperi, 2007). Conceived as « a social movement » articulating « an enterprise movement » and « a movement of thought », AR contributes to a fundamental unity of knowledge, to the extent that « dissociated, the enterprise movement and the movement of thought no longer have any meaning: deprived of its theoretical critique, of its confrontation with values, the enterprise becomes trivialized; deprived of experimentation, of confrontation with reality, thought sclerotizes or is reduced to an artefact. » (ibid., p. 68) From this perspective, our research therefore has productive and transformative aims: the production of new knowledge that is fundamentally dual (for use in action and for the dissemination of new scientific knowledge) and social transformation through knowledge and experimentation (Desroche, 1990).

In the final analysis, by helping to maintain this dialectic between the instituting and the instituted, AR is part of a dynamic that is conducive to the maintenance and strengthening of democracy in the areas where it is implemented. It opens up spaces for collective reflection and discussion, conducive to the development of joint analyses and the renewal of actions. In so doing, AR « provokes an educational and emancipatory process » (Draperi, 2007, p. 21), supporting collective empowerment (Christen-Gueissaz, 2006, p. 21), in other words, the informed participation of stakeholders in decision-making through actionable knowledge (Ballon & Bodet, 2017). In other words, the conduct of surveys by the people concerned, with a view to AR, fosters active citizenship. For J. Dewey, it is even the constitutive step of a participatory democracy, in which citizens have the capacity to analyze and propose solutions to the problematic situations they encounter (Dewey, 1927; Zask, 2008).

This explains why we have chosen to conduct this research from this perspective, as a tool for promoting participatory democracy in their cooperatives. This AR, conducted in the form of a survey inspired by Dewey's approach, is directly in line with a reflexive perspective involving the members of two co-operatives to develop a comparative analysis of our practices aimed directly at maintaining a democratic and participatory dynamic. Following the pragmatist approach to social enquiry (Dewey, 1938), our starting point is a problematic situation to which we need to look for answers, by investigating and analyzing our practices in a comparative way, using abductive reasoning. It should also be pointed out that this approach is in line with regular practices at Railcoop and SmartCoop, at least in terms of reflexivity, if not in terms of reflection.

### 2.1.2. A comparative case-study

This exploratory research takes the form of a comparative case study (Yin, 1989 ; Dumez, 2007, 2012). Considering our research subject (the dynamics of participation in the democratic governance of two cooperatives), a comprehensive analysis is warranted to encourage the emergence of reflexive wonder and identify causal mechanisms (Dumez, 2007, 2012). The aim of the case study is, on the one hand, to enrich existing theoretical perspectives (exploratory analytical grid) and, on the other, to stimulate reflection on the practices of each cooperative, in a perspective of social transformation aimed at strengthening participation and deepening democratic dynamics. Following an abductive mode of reasoning (Dumez, 2012), our interest here is in the facts, without first determining their theoretical orientations (Hamel, 1997). A solid means of drawing conclusions from relatively homogeneous cases (George & Bennett, 2005), the combination of intra-case and inter-case analysis enables us to put each case into perspective to stimulate reflection (Levy, 2008), with attention to context to appreciate their singularity and regularity.

The choice of cases is based on several criteria. Although different in terms of their sectors of activity (railways and support and accompaniment for autonomous workers), the two cooperatives share a common problem relating to how to mobilize and involve a large community of members in democratic governance (around 14.000 at Railcoop, 35.000 at least at SmartCoop). As multistakeholders cooperatives, SmartCoop and Railcoop have a heterogeneous membership. Both are committed to social transformation (redeveloping rail lines between medium-sized towns

as part of a socio-ecological transition, and promoting employment in decent working conditions through cooperation, mutualization and access to social protection). Last but not least, both are working to improve their participatory democracy, whether through participatory processes at SmartCoop or sociocracy-inspired practices at Railcoop. This desire translates into a reflexive look at their participatory and democratic experiments, with a view to improving both their successes and their shortcomings and biases.

More precisely, among the spaces and practices studied in this paper, we choose to focus on the functioning of 'circles', inspired by sociocratic principles in Railcoop and the Smart in Progress (SIP) participatory process set up in 2015 by SmartCoop. If the two processes are quite different (objectives, dynamics and functioning), they are key to ensure large participation of members and constitute the most significant and democratic experimentations in both cooperatives. Our dynamic analysis leads us to study circles at Railcoop since 2019 (their creation) and SIP at SmartCoop since 2015 (when the process began).

This research is based mainly on two types of data: activity reports, newsletters, websites, reports on internal surveys and polls, articles written by members, activity and summary reports from the circles and SIP. In addition, we draw on our respective experiences as associate members of Railcoop (Marius and Justine) and employee associates of SmartCoop (for Thomas and Orville). For the research, using an interview guide we devised, we described in pairs (Railcoop team, SmartCoop team) how democracy works (rules, mechanisms, tools), the history of the democratic experience to understand why these devices and practices have been implemented and how participation is actually practiced.

### 2.1.3. Methodology

By adopting an abductive mode of reasoning, it is possible to analyze a problem by exploring a set of ideas, without immediately attempting to mobilize a theoretical framework to open up new theoretical perspectives. Research is built up through « a series of iterations between observation and theoretical framework »: from the definition of the object of research, enabling stylised facts to be stated, to the identification of a set of ideas and the construction of a theoretical framework, before returning to observation (Labrousse, 2006, p. 40). This movement of « recursive loops » between theoretical and practical reflection makes it possible to test ideas (Dewey, 1938: 113-114) until we find the most significant idea in terms of theoretical and empirical knowledge. Starting with the initial problem of maintaining member participation in two large cooperatives, we began by identifying a set of ideas (solutions) and stylised facts, assessed according to their presence, relevance, absence, divergence and contradiction (Dumez, 2007: ii).

A crucial step from the empirical to the theoretical, the first stage of data processing involves description, based on the data gathered from documents and our cross-referenced interviews. This shaping of « originally unformed » or loose data leads to the constitution of organized and « nameable » elements (Hamel, 1997, p74-75). Identifying, circumscribing and arranging information and field observations enables us to uncover the research object, and constitutes the intra-case analysis stage.

First, each cooperative is analyzed, then their rules and practices are compared. This begins with a description of each cooperative's operation and history of democratic participation. Next, a quantitative assessment of participation was carried out, again in general terms. Finally, we take a qualitative look at participation practices, focusing on circles and SIP's cycles. This descriptive order enables us to understand the context in which these specific devices were developed, before taking a closer look at participatory practices and dynamics to better identify their strengths and limitations.

In concrete terms, the analysis of the two cases was carried out in three stages. Based on the literature review and our practical experience, we devised two categories of analysis, presented in this paper in tabular form. We rely in particular on the grid by G. Caire and S. Nivoix (2012), considering the evaluation criteria relating to participation (especially in general meetings), management and the exercise of democratic power. It will be adapted to the specificities of multi-member cooperatives, based on the literature on this type of cooperatives (Margado, 2002; Becuwe et al., 2014; Béji-Bécheur et al., 2016; Lanciano et al., 2014), as well as taking into account the sociocratic and holacratic inspirations that inspire the rules and practices of the two cooperatives (Maître, 2021; Ollivier and Rospabé, 2021).

The first brings together a set of quantitative criteria adapted from Caire & Nivoix (2012). The following categories have been chosen for this paper, as they are considered the most relevant for understanding member participation: number of members, number of employees, including employee members, amount (in euros) of the share, average amount invested, proportion of members who have subscribed to only one share, attendance rate at General Meetings. In addition to these general indicators, we have also taken an interest in the gender ratios in the democratic governance of each cooperative, in view of the challenge of inclusive participation: parity in membership, parity on the Board of Directors, parity on the Ethics Committee, parity on the operational team, parity on the Management Committee. The second category of qualitative analysis of participation was aimed at analyzing the two participatory democracy systems studied, based on the following nine questions :

1. What's it for?
2. Why does this space exist (history, reason)?
3. How are regularly these spaces and devices mobilized?
4. Who participates? How many participants are there?
5. What are the incentives/interest in participating?
6. How do they work? How are they used?
7. What are the links with other democratic bodies or spaces?
8. Does it work? What are the benefits and limitations?
9. What process of reflexivity, what action research on democracy?

Based on the documents studied and the interviews conducted, the Railcoop team analyzed SmartCoop's SIP system, while the SmartCoop team analyzed Railcoop's system. This analytical choice enabled us to cross our views and distance ourselves from our data, as well as creating a space conducive to discussion on contradictory analyses made on certain elements. Finally, the

table presented below was finalized by each respective team on the device of its cooperative, before carrying out the intercase analysis for each category jointly.

In summary, the third stage of the analysis consisted in deepening this comparative analysis through the prism of several questions: What do the co-ops have in common concerning the space studied? What's different? What works? What's not working? How do the reflexive processes at work support the dynamics of participatory democracy? What are the limits?

## 2.2. Description of the two cases

For each case, we begin with a general presentation of the cooperative, before taking a look back at its history, to better understand the origins of the two democratic systems studied.

### 2.2.1. Introducing Railcoop, rail cooperative

Following the opening up of passenger transport to competition in France, the Railcoop cooperative society was created in 2019, by 32 citizens. Their objective is to collectively meet an unmet service need: train travel between medium-sized towns in France. More broadly, the aim is to guarantee the mobility of citizens across the country, while reducing their CO2 emissions in the context of the climate crisis. One of Railcoop's key objectives is to relaunch the Bordeaux-Lyon line (closed by SNCF since July 2014). In June 2023, Railcoop has 35 employees (including two people in charge of cooperative life) and 14.235 members. On the 1st of January, the 13.498 members were distributed into 13.242 natural persons, 17 employees, 29 local authorities, 79 technical and financial partners and 131 other legal entities<sup>2</sup>. The median age of the members is 48. What sets it apart is that it has managed to gather so many members, supporting a project still in development, in a relatively short space of time (4 years). The launch date for the Bordeaux-Lyon line should be June 2024. It should be noted that at Railcoop, passenger train users will be able to become members if they wish, but this will not be compulsory.

#### The Story of a Democracy

Aware of the challenges of democracy and participation, Railcoop's founders have supported the choice of this status with a number of practices and means designed to provide concrete tools for democracy, in particular through the lens of participation. The cooperative draws inspiration from sociocracy<sup>3</sup>. Three member circles were set up immediately after the cooperative's creation: the governance circle, the member animation circle and the network development circle. The governance circle is concerned with democratic issues, and in particular with the functioning of the circles. In 2020, Railcoop recruited a person responsible for cooperative life and launched information/education initiative for members (frequently asked questions, lexicon, webinars, ambassador training). Other circles are created. In 2021, the functioning of the circles is specified by several articles introduced into the internal regulations. These set out the democratic

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<sup>2</sup> Those three categories are merged into a single category of "legal entities" in Smartcoop.

<sup>3</sup> As a form of shared governance, sociocracy has been experimented with and conceptualized by Endenburg (1998).

conditions under which the cooperative's bodies operate, and an ethic and mediation commission was set up to ensure that democratic values are effectively applied.

### Governance Organization

Railcoop's governance is organized around a General Management team (including a Managing Director), a Board of Directors (BD) representing the various SCIC constituencies, the Ethical Transparency Commission and a set of member circles, including one dedicated to member animation and one to governance. There are five categories of members: employees, natural persons, local authorities, technical and financial partners, and other legal entities. For general assembly's votes, colleges have each 20% of votes : the objective is that natural persons (who are 98% of the members) do not have the whole power<sup>4</sup>. Within the CA, one person = one vote, notwithstanding their college. Directors are elected to the board for 4 years. In case of demission, the CA is entitled to co-opt new members. The renewal of the Board of Directors came with a large number of applications from individuals (in line with the total number of applications), whereas for the other colleges, there was more or less one application per position. This observation reveals a strong citizen dynamic that has been characteristic of Railcoop to date.

Concerning the circle, the purpose of their members is "to be a force for proposals and innovation for the rest of the cooperative, based on the collective intelligence of volunteer members", enabling them to make a commitment that goes beyond the purchase of one or more shares. To create a circle, at least five members must submit a request to the Board of Directors. Circle activities require the presence of one or more animators, a Board referent and a secretary, according to the internal regulations.

According to the by-laws, the functioning of the circles and the roles to be fulfilled are based on the principles of sociocracy. Circles are given a great deal of democratic freedom in the way they choose to share responsibilities and make decisions, as well as in the way they appoint their members. Circles are independent; they are not subordinate to the Board of Directors or management, but they have no decision-making power. They can put forward ideas, solutions and proposals to the Board or management, who may or may not take them up. In order to be in line with the sociocratic principle of the double link and to ensure the involvement and act coherence of the cooperative governance, each circle appointed in the past a secretary and a "referent", as well as a "rapporteur" to make sure the information circulated between the circle and the Board. This is no longer the case; from now on, there will be an inter-circle meeting after each Board meeting, but there will no longer be any reference directors for the circles. In fact, it appeared that the volunteer workload associated with this follow-up was too heavy for the volunteer directors.

On June 1, 2023, there were 30 circles. Each circle has between 5 and 150 members, but attendance at meetings varies greatly from circle to circle, depending on Railcoop news. 800 members are more or less active in the circles. 18 of them are thematic:

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<sup>4</sup> That point is often discussed since for instance 14000 natural persons share 20% of votes as well as 14 employees, which means that an employee vote has 1000 times more weight than a natural person.



- Eight are devoted to the "offer": freight, network development, fine services, on-board and station services, disability, pricing, links with cycling and the car ;
  - Five are devoted to internal operations: digital, governance, member organization, management of operating contingencies, economic and financial model;
  - Five are cross-functional: model railroading, promotion and knowledge of Europe's railway worlds, environmental aspects, philosophical reflections on life by train, research.
- 12 circles are geographical : Bordeaux, Lyon, Limoges, Île-de-France, Nancy-Toul, Gers, Alsace, Auvergne, Quercy-Rouergue, Creuse, Cap-Carène-Sillon, Alpin.

In case of temporary topics, working groups may emerge but they are generally linked to circles. Circles thus appear to be the key to participatory democracy at Railcoop, and all the more so at a time when the cooperative continues to seek sufficient funding to launch its passenger transport business between Lyon and Bordeaux.

In September 2022, a survey of circle leaders conducted by the Cercle governance revealed a feeling of not seeing their work recognized and taken into account, and even a feeling of uselessness, with little recognition and mobilization by the Board of Directors, the team of employees or general management (Ballon & Chevallier, forthcoming). Then, since October 2022, there is a democratic crisis : the president resigned as well as another administrator and a local authority's board of directors represented. A transitional president has been chosen. A decision has been also taken to change the general management team. This is an opportunity to review some points about governance.

### 2.2.2. Introducing Smart

SmartCoop is facing the world of work which is undergoing profound transformations. Its mission is to help autonomous and freelance workers to emancipate themselves, to reclaim their work, their profession, and its meaning and value. Founded in 1998 as a non-profit organization to help and support workers in the arts, Smart has existed for 25 years and has adopted a cooperative structure according to Belgian law since December 2016. Smart is a shared enterprise providing both autonomy and security for its members and users, from a wide range of economic activities, through shared services and tools that give them access to the benefits of social security and employee status. A whole series of strong values underpin Smart's cooperative project : openness and adaptation, democracy, autonomy, cooperation and solidarity, protection, innovation and pragmatism, non-dependence, trust and empowerment. In June 2023, SmartCoop had 210 employees (including 6 in charge of cooperative life) and nearly 35,755 members. Smart is also currently present in 6 other European countries (France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Austria and Sweden). The median age of the members is 40. There are three member categories for SmartCoop (service users, employees and legal entities<sup>5</sup>). At SmartCoop, users and members are the same population (99% of users of SmartCoop services are members and 99% of members are users).

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<sup>5</sup> As presented above that third category is split into three categories in the Railcoop case (technical and economical partners, local authorities, other legal entities).

## The Story of a Democracy

The project was initially launched in 1998 to meet the needs of artistic workers in Belgium. Smart has always worked by pooling forces and people in a collective and mutualist dynamic, represented today by the choice of the cooperative form. However, when it was "just" an association, the issue of participation in decision-making bodies was already a recurring challenge: few people really saw themselves as active "members" or adherents to the Smart project, but more as beneficiaries and users of its services. The association's AGMs were not well attended.

*« By opting to become a worker cooperative, by deciding not to offer returns on capital investment, and by providing access to the government of the firm for its active worker-members, SMart is seeking a form of government that allows it to be structured institutionally in ways in keeping with its goal of building a collective capability for security and autonomy. [...] SMart constitutes an interesting case of a democratic institutional experimentation, providing its members with a collective capability to face the many sources of uncertainty affecting workers. »* (Charles et al., 2020 p. 170)

SmartCoop's governance structure has been subject to a profound transformation the last couple of years. From 2015 till 2021 it was redefined through a participatory process entitled "Smart in Progress" – so named SIP –, submitting the basis of the co-operative following project. This resulted in a strategic plan for the period 2016 – 2020 ("Smart 2020"). Six SIP's cycles happened between 2015 and 2022. Each year, specific topics were proposed to work : The working groups dealt with the following topics : whose needs Smart should meet, with which tools, how these services must be financed and how the governance of the structure should be organized; ethics, finance, IT and representation ; the instalment of a centralized purchasing centre, how we can measure the social impact of Smart and how we should install sector-related networks ; the shared workplaces (third places), gender equality and how to launch and consolidate an economic activity by Smart ; the way the structure supports its members.

The Board of Directors of SmartCoop evaluates the recommendations made by the working groups and deduces the strategic orientations. It also elects one (or more) managing directors, whose role is to ensure that the validated recommendations are implemented. However, implementation is based on prioritization within the management team according to what is most appropriate and the resources available, whether human, financial or logistical.

## Governance Organization

SmartCoop's governance is based on the holding of an Annual General Meeting of members, which is also organized in a festive and learning context, through activities and workshops throughout the day, while formalizing at a precise moment the legal General Meeting and its agenda. Each year, the General Meeting elect and partially renews its Board of Directors, to promote greater stability and experience among the group of directors. Since 2021, this process has been enshrined in the cooperative's statutes. Previously, the terms of office of all directors were 4 years.

From now on, the General Meeting of members will elect 4 or 5 directors on an alternating basis, depending on the number of mandates to be filled and in compliance with the principles laid down in the statutes, such as the requirement that the composition of the Board of Directors, must be made up of at least 40% men and 40% women. This partial renewal allows for a more appropriate handover between old and new directors, ensures that new people have the necessary skills, and means that positions left vacant by resignations or that still need to be filled on a more regular basis can be put forward for election.

The Board of Directors is considered to be SmartCoop's main instance, as it is elected and composed by the members, who are responsible for taking decisions on the cooperative's issues, with the support and expertise of the managing directors and the delegated administration. In SmartCoop's governance, members are divided into three categories :

- Category A: 'employee-entrepreneurs', i.e. all workers who are members of SmartCoop and who develop an economic activity using the shared tools and services of the cooperative company which are made available to them as members.
- Category B: employees of the mutualising teams who work on the mutualisation of services and tools for the benefit of members, and who are also themselves members, even though they are salaried employees.
- Category C: other partners, natural or legal persons, who share Smart's goals.

SmartCoop's Board of Directors has a representative breakdown between the three categories of members, with 3/5ths of the directors elected on the basis of candidates from category A (provided that they have been actively using the cooperative's services for at least one year) and 2/5ths of the directors elected on the basis of candidates from category B and/or C (on condition of actively adhering to the aims pursued by Smart, of having been with Smart for at least one year in the case of B members, or of being active in the cooperative sector outside Smart in the case of natural persons who are C members).

The Smart in Progress (SIP) approach leads to Smart's transformation into a cooperative, in order to achieve greater participation in the co-construction of a future for Smart's common project, but sometimes coming up against consultation and consultation rather than co-decision on the opinions and recommendations of the cooperative's members and future members. During these 5 years of SIP's annual participative cycles (between 2017 and 2021), several themes and working groups have been proposed, resulting each year in a book of recommendations (almost 220 in total over 5 years) which were then submitted to the Board of Directors for consideration, opinion and decision-making. There were discussions on the structure's mode of governance, the essential new economic model aimed at ensuring the shared enterprise's sustainability, the public of users the structure is aimed at (with the choice of turning to freelance workers more generally than just artists), and the new tools to be developed to adapt services to use.

### 3. Analysis

The ongoing analysis takes place in three stages. First, we compare statistics concerning formal participation and information about members. Secondly, we consider each case through the prism of several key thematic angles. Finally, we put into perspective the regularities and differences observed in both cases.

#### 3.1. Analysis of participatory governance practices

Before analyzing the dynamics, practices and tools concerning the participation, we focus on general information about the democratic organization and the members' participation, with an attention to gender.

##### 3.1.1. Statistical analysis

We focus on general information about the democratic organization and the members' participation, with attention to gender. First, we compared the number of members (cf. Table 1).

Table 1 - Memberships in Smartcoop and Railcoop

	Smartcoop	Railcoop
Number of members	35755	13498
- including employees natural persons	35681 (99,8 %)	13242 (98,1%)
- including employees	63 of the 210 employees (30%)	17 of the 35 employees (50%)
- including legal entities	31 (no legal authority)	220 (30 legal authorities)

Sources: Management reports (2022)

It should be noted that, at SmartCoop, users and members are the same population (99% of users of SmartCoop's services are members and 99% of members are users), whereas this will not be the case for passengers using Railcoop's trains and not all members will regularly use Railcoop's trains (for instance the very many Île de France residents. The average age is higher in Railcoop (48) than in SmartCoop (40) since retired workers have no reason to use SmartCoop services, contrary to Railcoop services. Outside natural persons users who are 98 (Railcoop) to 99,8 (SmartCoop) of members, some members are employees and others are legal entities (31 in Smartcoop, 220 in Railcoop among which 30 local authorities). Since they are minorities, the implication of those legal entities is challenging for both cooperatives.

In Smartcoop as in Railcoop, natural persons hold 3 shares (cf. Table 2). In Railcoop, 56% of members have only one share, compared to 30% in Railcoop, since users have to buy another share each year. The biggest shareholders hold only 6% of the share capital in both cooperatives. Even with the “one person=one voice” rule, a shareholder could be more influential because of a huge investment: this may not be the case in those cooperatives with only 6%.

Table 2 - Capital allocations in Smartcoop and Railcoop

	Smartcoop	Railcoop
Share amount	30	100
Average invested capital	98,37	352 (natural persons) et 43000 (legal entities)
Total capital	3,5 million	5,6 million
maximum share of capital held by a single person	6%	6%

Sources: Cooperative bylaws, Management reports (2022), membership data bases

Both cooperatives managed to gather several thousand members for voting<sup>6</sup> (cf. Table 3), but we observe progressive decreases in the General Assemblies, which is coherent to what is observed in big cooperatives with few cooperatives above 8% of voting members (Braconnier & Caire, 2009). Smartcoop was already a big company when it became a cooperative, whereas Railcoop was only a little association in 2018 before becoming a cooperative.

Table 3 - Membership and voting rates in Smartcoop and Railcoop

		2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Febr 2023	June 2023
Smartcoop	Number of voters	650	1184	738	752	1013		
	Number of members	19004	20404	27268	32249	34163		
	Voting rates	3%	6%	3%	2%	3%		

<sup>6</sup> As in most cooperatives, the resolution approval rates are often above 90%.

Railcoop	Number of voters				5201	7260	6626	2900
	Number of members		50	3100	8074	12336	13710	14000
	Voting rates				64%	59%	48%	21%

Sources : General Assemblies Reports

NB : there was an extraordinary general assembly in February 2023 in Railcoop to validate a strategic orientation

As presented in the theoretical part, even if there is a democratic intention, many factors may give more weight to certain social categories, according to their economic weights, their qualifications, their professional experiences, their available times, their social networks, their genders, etc. We focus here on the genders<sup>7</sup> (cf. Table 4). Railcoop encounters more difficulties to mobilize women or to encourage men to leave responsibilities, maybe due to the rail area which is traditionally very masculine. In both cooperatives, we observe that women are more present in the ethics commission.

Table 4 - Parity in Smartcoop and Railcoop

Parity (women/men)	SmartCoop	Railcoop
in whole membership	48 % / 52 %	26 % / 74 %
in SIP/circles	+50% women	18 % / 82 %
within SIP or circles managers	+50% women	8 % / 92 %
in board of directors	45 % / 55 %	26 % / 74 %
in the ethics commission	70 % / 30 %	45 % / 55 %
within the employees	56,94% / 43,06%	50 % / 50 %
in the direction	38 % / 62 %	50 % / 50 %

<sup>7</sup> The are reflections on non-binary genders in both cooperatives, but no possibility to give numbers yet.

Sources : Management reports (2022), website of the two cooperatives, memberships data bases.

These data enable us to statistically identify trends that show unequal participation at GAs, but also when considering gender. Further analysis will be required, but at this stage it gives us several keys to understanding participatory dynamics in the two schemes studied in this paper.

### 3.1.2. Qualitative analysis of each cases

For the qualitative analysis, the depiction of the two processes has been synthesized in the following grid (cf. Grid 1).

*Grid 1 : Depicted analysis of the the circles in Railcoop and of Smart in Progress in SmartCoop*

	<b>Railcoop - Circles</b>	<b>SmartCoop - Smart in Progress (SIP)</b>
<b>What's the goal?</b>	<p>To propose innovations to the cooperative, based on the collective intelligence of members. To let members participate even if there are non-employees, or non-members of the board of directors.</p>	<p>To transform the Smart-project into a cooperative structure, owned and managed by the users of its services and enabling employees to become more directly involved in the cooperative structure as members and not just as employees through their work. To reinforce the participation of members by bringing them together, and making it possible to see, observe and influence its development through the direct input of its users, so that it is better adapted to the reality of their daily lives, to this constantly changing world of work. To discuss collectively strategic orientations, and in doing so helping the BD and management to take decisions.</p>
<b>How are regularly these spaces and facilities used?</b>	<p>Circles meet once a month on average, at a distance, unless members are in the same geographical proximity. Requiring additional meetings can occur for specific intra-circles working groups. Circles can also be put on pause if there is no assignment in progress: they may meet once a quarter or a semester to keep in touch. Some circles do not meet anymore since the facilitators did not find a successor. The internal forum which is supposed to create a free and informal space for discussions does not work. But thanks to a growing interacquaintance, members manage to directly collaborate outside circles. A collaborative web space is developing to help circles to work together.</p>	<p>After the first round in 2015-2017, there were four other rounds, one each year. Most of the time working groups are created during each round' They meet on average 3 to 4 times a year. Plus big gatherings happen once a year. Contributions can also be made on specific platforms (e.g., several surveys and inquiries were organized), detailed papers, informal discussions on a specific place ("small talks") occurred. The last round working groups in 2020-2021 were covered partially in Belgium and in France.</p>



<p><b>Who is taking part? How many are the participants?</b></p>	<p>Over 800 members (out of 14000, that is to say 6% of the total) belong to one or more circles. The number of regular participants in a circle is between 5 and 10. The number of members per circle between 10 and 30. Not all members of the circles take part in their activities. Employees may take part out of their working time (for instance as members of a territorial circle) or as invited in circles.</p>	<p>Users of the services, partners, clients, suppliers and experts: every stakeholder had the opportunity to speak up and contribute to the process. A big consultation was run for the first round of 2015-2017, with 1756 contributions. In the working groups: there were on average between 7 &amp; 20 participants, that is to say in total between 35 and 80 persons who have participated each year. Specific place was accorded to employees for secretary and animation tasks.</p>
<p><b>What are the motivations, incentives and benefits of taking part?</b></p>	<p>Motivations :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Contributing to the design and implementation of Railcoop's future services (e.g. train access for people with disabilities) : it is often said that it is difficult to be listened to by the current railway operator.</li> <li>● Joining a community to share ideas and act together</li> <li>● Participating to a democratic dynamic</li> </ul> <p>Incentives :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Newsletters for recruitment or for acknowledgement of circle members.</li> <li>● Helped by a cooperative life team (2 to 3 employees).</li> <li>● Budget to run actions (reduced since economic difficulties)</li> </ul> <p>Benefits :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Access to specific meetings for circles members and to direct work with employees</li> <li>● Possibility to communicate during general assemblies or webinars</li> </ul>	<p>Motivations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Interest for the topics that are discussed,</li> <li>● The fact of diving into and contributing to the operations and functioning of the cooperative</li> <li>● Show their adherence and put their skills at the service of the cooperative structure. (SmartInProgress#3, 2019).</li> <li>● The meeting of other shareholders of the cooperative structure.</li> </ul> <p>Incentives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Newsletters for recruitment or for acknowledgment of members' participation</li> <li>● Support of cooperative life team</li> <li>● Operational team support for animation and secretary tasks</li> </ul> <p>Benefits :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Use members' ideas to improve tools and the application of cooperative enterprise values</li> <li>● Networking between members and breaking out of isolation</li> </ul>
<p><b>How do they work?</b></p>	<p>Work to define common democratic rules and the functioning of the circles was carried out and included in the rules of procedure, then voted on by the AGM in 2021. The roles are inspired by the principles of sociocracy, but the effective organization is quite free. Out of a survey by interviews, a facilitating circles guide</p>	<p>The process was based on collective intelligence, and took place over several years, using online surveys, major meetings and working groups, as well as various associated seminars, AGMs and Board meetings. The SIP process is designed and organized by the board of directors and the permanent employee teams, then validated by the general</p>

	<p>was written<sup>8</sup> : it identifies different ways members organize their circles. Inter-circle meetings are regularly organized to ensure communication between circles (activities, news, links).</p>	<p>assembly. A number of workshops were organized for the participants in order to bring together the various ideas on the cooperative future of the company, through democratic participation in the proposals to be put forward. A blog was also created to host the minutes of the meetings, compile documentary sources and so on.</p>
<p><b>What are the links with other democratic bodies and forums?</b></p>	<p>The circles are independent. They have no subordinate relationship to the BD or management, but they have no decision-making power either. They are the force of proposals for ideas, solutions, addressed to the BD or to the management who may or may not take them up. BD and employees may suggest topics for the circles. There are spaces for inter-circle discussion, such as within the governance circle and the membership circle, where many questions can be addressed to the employee teams.</p> <p>Circles' facilitators can be invited to BD meetings to stay informed about cooperative news. There is the possibility to work with employees on specific points. While the circles' operations are inspired by sociocracy, Railcoop has not adopted the idea of a dual link between the circle and the boards of directors and management, which creates confusion and frustration for circle members who see their autonomy reduced.</p>	<p>Topics were proposed to the general assembly by the management or the BD. The working groups lead to recommendations addressed to the board of directors. The board decided on which recommendations were to be put into action by the management, that is driven by the delegated managers. Every year following, the general assembly gathers again and evaluates the actions and the (financial) results of the group by discharging the board of directors (Plan d'orientation stratégique Smart, 2020).</p>
<p><b>What process of reflexivity, what action research on democracy?</b></p>	<p>There is an Ethics and Mediation Commission. The survey practice within circles made it possible to create other spaces for reflection and discussion for the members questioning their own practices inside the circles.</p> <p>Consideration was given to extending the question of democracy and the same type of investigation within the CA, to the operational team and to the Ethics and Mediation Commission.</p>	<p>Over the course of the process, a number of surveys, analyses and writing were carried out to find out how it was perceived by the participants, and were the subject of several writing for the document. Writing by researchers and work in the field of lifelong learning have also been collected to support the reflections of the working groups. Finally, after 5 years of annual cycles of the SIP process, an evaluation was carried out in 2022 to consider how to revive the participation and motivation of members, in the form of today's SmartLabs, small laboratories where members no longer make</p>

<sup>8</sup> <https://rail.coop/guide-animation-cercles>

		recommendations but are directly involved in their requests for changes.
<p><b>Does it work? What are the benefits and limitations?</b></p>	<p>Results :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The number of circles is increasing since the creation of Railcoop, such as the number of participants. There is a strong enthusiasm for democratic moments.</li> <li>● Circles have achieved significant results such as the network development circle, which has been working on opening up several rail lines in the future.</li> </ul> <p>Insatisfactions :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Weak knowledge of the regulatory framework (survey 2021-2022)<sup>9</sup>.</li> <li>● Frustrations since insufficient considerations of circles results (lack of disposability of the board of directors and employees, little possibilities to direct experimentations for circles)</li> </ul>	<p>Results :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Spontaneous participation and durability of engagements within the members</li> <li>● 220 recommendations among which :             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ First SIP process finally resulted in the creation of a cooperative structure that controls all the legal entities that were created throughout the years within the Smart-group in Belgium.</li> <li>○ Creation of the Ethics Committee.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p>Insatisfactions :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Frustrations among the participants were noticed due to the short period of time in which quite complicated topics were covered (2019), and some themes were too technical.</li> <li>● Participants also questioned the size of the groups.</li> <li>● It takes more time than expected to reach concrete results, so it was decided to create new working groups, which directly experiment initiatives (Smartlabs).</li> </ul>

Source: Produced by the authors.

<sup>9</sup> Pour en savoir plus : click [here](#) (in French)

## 3.2. Comparison between the two cases

Based on these descriptive data, organized by theme, the aim is to propose initial elements of comparison between the two processes, in order to understand how they encourage and strengthen participation in the democratic process, supported by a process of ongoing reflection on what is being built.

What do the co-ops have in common concerning the systems studied? In both cases, the aim is to strengthen the participation of a larger number of member-policyholders beyond the statutory bodies. There is little formalism in both processes: many opportunities to adapt to circumstances. More formalism in Railcoop (rules of procedures), but much freedom for the organization in fact. Thanks to its seniority and the fact that the economic activity is functioning, SmartCoop may benefit from more interacquaintance to develop informal interactions. What is different? At SmartCoop, the spaces are working groups whose themes vary from year to year and whose topics are determined by the decision-making bodies. At Railcoop, they take the form of territorial or thematic circles with no time limit. They are sometimes punctuated by missions. In most cases, however, it is the members who decide on the creation of the circles and the content of their actions.

In terms of participation, in both cooperatives, around 5% of members have signed up to workspaces (800 at Railcoop, 1,000 at SmartCoop). In practice, regular contributor number between 50 and 100 at SmartCoop (around 2 per 1000) and between 100 and 200 at Railcoop (around 1%). However, we have not gone so far as to compare the amount of work produced by each cooperative. We note that while the SIP process was a real success at the outset, with over 1,000 participants between 2015 and 2016, it fell to 300 in 2017, and then more structured working groups on specific themes between 2018 and 2021. Motivations for participating in processes are economic (helping to develop pertinent services), politic (experimenting a democratic organization) and social (joining a community). Among the incentives to participate, we identify communication (newsletters, networks), budgets allowed, specific spaces created and dedicated, work of cooperative life team, implication of general management and boards of Directors, stimulation to participate between members. There are different benefits in participating: members gather acknowledgement by employees and the board of directors and direct access to them.

As for the links with other democratic bodies, at Railcoop, the circles are self-selecting, but the Board of Directors and the operational team can suggest topics. Based on the participants' discussions and the surveys carried out, SmartCoop's Board of Directors and General Management identify the topics for future discussions, which are then validated at the General Meeting, as well as the results obtained at the end of the process. The link between participation and decision-making appears to be more important at SmartCoop than at Railcoop, which may also be explained by the fact that SmartCoop has been around longer than Railcoop.

What works? What's not working? In both cases, the active participation of a significant number of members can be observed, with each cooperative making considerable efforts to make these

spaces attractive and some enthusiasm, with ambivalent results. Circles such as SIP produce significant results for the cooperative, touching on decision-making processes, strategy definition and the search for solutions to problems encountered. They have no formal powers of governance. Usage of circles as SIP works depends mainly on the BD and managing direction (contrary to the sociocratic principles which inspires Railcoop). Because of the importance they are accorded in discourse, they do in fact have the power to steer certain dynamics. However, the profusion of ideas generated by the enthusiasm of the members involved meant that the structures were overwhelmed, and many ideas were unable to materialize. As a result, both cooperatives had to find new organizational solutions to ensure that the members involved were not too massively disillusioned.

In both cases, the process is evolving. In 2022, Smartcoop decided to give the groups the opportunity to experiment directly with the ideas they had worked on with the “SmartLabs”. Recommendations are synthesized in books of recommendation, whereas there are less formally recognised in Railcoop, since circles transmit gradually when their works are achieved. At Railcoop, the proposal is to strengthen the links between the employees and the circles, reversing an initial decision to limit these links so that salaried staff are not overwhelmed by the demands made on them.

At both Railcoop and Smartcoop, a reflexive process accompanies the process, using surveys and reflection periods to establish a framework for reflexivity, sometimes resulting in written documents. At Railcoop, however, they remain closely linked to the work of researchers. Also at Railcoop, it remains difficult to assess the impact of analyses carried out in decision-making bodies and among circle members. While at SmartCoop, a form of action research seems to have been gradually established on the bangs, notably through the publication of articles on its website, at Railcoop, it still appears to be in its infancy.

This initial comparative analysis will also enable us to better identify the limits of these processes.

### 3.3. Initial points for discussion

Through this selected focus on the criteria and characteristics of the dynamics of member participation, we have been able to observe and analyze in this paper. Now, it is necessary to highlight a few points concerning these spaces for participation and cooperative democratic experimentation. Dedicated to the members, whether in Railcoop's circles or in the former participative process Smart in Progress (which has now become SmartLabs), they bring out recommendations, ideas, motivations, and proposals for improvement from the members themselves concerning the evolution of the cooperative project so that it can continue to meet their needs or social aspirations. Of course, each cooperative has its own cooperative project: Railcoop aiming at the development of new railway lines in non-prioritized if not « neglected » territories, SmartCoop aiming to improve tools and the transparency of the economic model.

The questions that arise then are what are the links between the community of members, the members involved in the SIP/SmartLabs circles and working groups or on the Board of Directors,

and those involved in the areas of participation and democratic experimentation? How do the members involve in these forums and bodies "report" on their work to the members? Conversely, how do the members of the Board decide on the proposals or work of members from Railcoop circles or cycles? On what basis does the BD take up, pass on and/or prioritize the work of the 30 circles or the 220 SIP recommendations to the operational teams? How do they take them on board? An important aspect of these questions is the measure of operational reality that is required if the recommendations are to become desired and effective realities for the benefit of members. Unless the circles are also made up of members who are experts in these areas?

Railcoop could be inspired from the book of recommendations which emerge from each SIP cycle at SmartCoop. And SmartCoop could be inspired by the continuous vitality and motivation of the Railcoop circles. With all these questions, there are perhaps two subtopics for Railcoop:

- at the democratic level: how transparent is the work of the circles? Through the circles, what are the BD's links with the (entire) community of members? And outside the circles?
- at an operational level: how is the work handled in practical terms (which certainly has an impact on the links between the community of member-policyholders, the circles and the BD)?

Also, what do the people involved in the participation circles and forums represent (quantitatively) in relation to the wider community of members? This is a recurring and common issue in « large » cooperatives such as SmartCoop and Railcoop. Based on our analysis, we were able to identify that around 5 to 6% of the community of members join and get involved in the circles or in SIP, most often with very occasional interventions over time, and which in a way represents the most involved fringe of the community of members, more so than through participation in voting at AGMs?

Given this small number, SmartCoop is sometimes questioned on the grounds that the recommendations or work of a minority of members are not necessarily legitimate in the eyes of most members. There is also a more discreet form of participation, more immediate and every day, through the daily dialogue and listening of the operational teams (the advisers inside SmartCoop) responsible for supporting and monitoring the activities of the members hosted within SmartCoop, who focus on meeting their immediate needs, far removed from any concerns about participating in discussion forums within the cooperative. Participation in the AGM also remains the possibility of electing the representatives from among the members who will be responsible for deciding (and thus legitimizing?) which SIP recommendations should be prioritized and applied, resulting from the work of the voluntary and participative "minority". The SIP evaluation also showed that « change takes time » and that the rhythm of the recommendations issued each year was probably too great for the operational teams to keep up with. While sometimes a recommendation generates a change that has not been prioritized, or the means are not yet available to prioritize it, it should not be overlooked that many recommendations have finally been incorporated into the cooperative's articles of association, or into SmartCoop's strategic guidelines for 2020 and then 2025. There is a need to decide what to prioritize 'strategically', because we can't do everything at once, and once again, change takes time.

SmartCoop's objective with SIP was to develop a cooperative in which each stakeholder (users, employees, customers) could benefit. However, a whole series of members, including most of the permanent and mutualizing team, were not included (as most of them were not members). Finally, only a small proportion of people, members and participants really contributed (3rd circle of participation) to the participatory process. These were the actual participants in the working groups. And it is this circle that is tending to shrink. The SIP process was an imperfect approach but it had the merit of existing, of involving members and future members of the cooperative project in making, in progress. All this contributes to creating a "frustration factory" and therefore a potential danger for future participation, with the famous "what's the point if you don't do anything about what I say"? As for the SmartLabs that have just been launched, where member-policyholders are made more active players, it is still too early to be able to make an analysis, as they have only just been launched.

At Railcoop, we have identified a cooperative project with a clear and assertive democratic intention, which is reflected in the attention paid to make it effective, coupled with a high level of commitment on the part of the organisers interviewed. This research also highlights five major problems in the way the circles operate. Firstly, there is a lack of knowledge and/or understanding of the internal rules suggesting a sociocratic organisation to the circles, as well as a lack of concrete tools to implement these rules. Secondly, there are difficulties in allocating roles within the clubs, but also in mobilising and actively involving members. Thirdly, the double links do not seem to have been really established due to a lack of time, particularly on the part of volunteer directors, leading to frustration and even a feeling that the work carried out by the circles is not sufficiently taken into account. This is what led the Governance Circle to look into ways of transmitting and distributing the internal rules to facilitators and members, as well as sharing tools for facilitating groups. There is therefore a need to recognise the work of the circles, which is still insufficiently considered, in a situation where Railcoop's future is still unknown and uncertain.

In the autumn of 2022, the resignation of the Chairman, announced in the newsletter without further information, highlighted a certain lack of transparency in the decisions of the General Management and the Board of Directors, leading to an outcry from several circle leaders and members. On the other hand, on several occasions in the governance circle, mention was made of a lack of sufficient cooperative culture within the cooperative, which would call for more education in cooperation. Moreover, the number of employee-members is limited. The cooperative is currently considering this issue. A recent governance crisis, following on from the first, has also highlighted a management problem that is leading to changes in the general management, as well as a review of the cooperative's priorities. It is interesting to note that with these changes Railcoop has chosen to strengthen its links with the circles to deal with this crisis. In other words, Railcoop is facing difficulties also linked to the delay in its launch due to an ambitious project requiring a lot of capital in a technical sector. Despite this, Railcoop is very attractive, with a growing number of members, but the question remains as to how to animate cooperative life to encourage participation in the cooperative's development needs. There is a risk that the participatory dynamic will be lost because of these crises and the delays in getting the first train line up and running. Indeed, attendance at the last AGM illustrates a growing challenge.

In SmartCoop and Railcoop, the larger community and a public include persons less 'converted' to the cause (at least in SmartCoop's case), which may also be the very aim of the social transformation project. But in this case, isn't it interesting to say collectively that it's not a problem that there is ultimately only a minority who are able and want to participate in democratic processes? This is sometimes a major obstacle that we observed at SmartCoop through the SIP process, a lack of legitimacy given to the participatory process, even though the problem was sometimes seen the other way round. Another major concern is the highlight on the dynamics of two participatory processes whose results were in fact limited, even though it was new, original and... innovative. Sometimes there was a fear of facing up to the difficulties of these limits, of the failures of broader and more constant participation, whereas it is rather these more negative effects that will require more energy from the teams running the participation spaces, conditioning and the success of these democratic innovations.

This discussion will be explored in greater depth in relation to the literature.

## Conclusion

This working paper compares the formal and informal arrangements and the evolution of the dynamics of participation in democratic governance at Railcoop and SmartCoop, highlighting their practices, the tensions encountered, and the experiments undertaken to reduce them. This communication puts in perspective this continuous experimentation of maintaining a participatory democracy in two multistakeholder cooperatives, through the first results of an ongoing action-research. Thus, this work is part of the rich cooperative tradition (Desroches 1990; Draperi, 2007; Ballon et al., 2020; Ballon et al., 2022), echoing the pragmatist tradition of enquiry as democratic process (Dewey, 1938). We show that these two cooperatives must skillfully maintain a discourse that highlights their alternative dimension (Del Fa and Vasquez, 2019), as a factor of attractiveness and motivation for members, as well as daily practices. Although participation never reaches 100%, it is necessary to ensure that the voice of member-policyholders is expressed regularly and with full knowledge of the facts. In this respect, we show the importance of a permanent reflexivity on our practices, through surveys, writing, and spaces favourable to critical and contradictory discussions, if this is done in a constructive and transparent way. Beyond that, we show the interest of highlighting the 5th and 6th principle of the ICA - education, training and information, on the one hand, and inter-cooperation on the other - between two co-operatives sharing issues related to governance and democratic participation. In the long term, this research will enable our results to contribute to ongoing research into the fabric of democracy in SSE organizations, and in cooperatives.



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