



**Platform
Cooperativism
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INSTITUTE
FOR THE
COOPERATIVE
DIGITAL
ECONOMY

THE LOCAL IMPLEMENTATION OF PLATFORM CO-OPS IN ARGENTINA

A Report by

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About the Institute for Digital Cooperative Economy (ICDE)

The Institute conducts cross-disciplinary research about the emerging cooperative digital economy, which is relatively uncharted territory in anthropology, political science, sociology, history, law, and economics. This rapidly expanding field is also inextricably linked to labor and cooperative studies. This work is concerned with finance, entrepreneurship, and organizational studies in business schools. Governance and corporate structure are critical subjects in law schools. The Institute's mission, in recognition of existing research gaps, is to provide applied and theoretical knowledge, education, and policy analysis.

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1.

INTRODUCTION

One of the great transformations in current societies is the rise and ubiquity of platforms. These are digital infrastructures that allow different groups of users to interact. Among the numerous platforms that have emerged since the second decade of this century, digital labor platforms have been in the spotlight not only due to the job opportunities they create, but mainly because of their visibility and negative social impacts. These platforms, which organize the processes that connects consumers or suppliers with workers (Haidar, 2020; López Mourelo & Pereyra, 2020), set out forms of labor in which workers are incorporated by companies as microentrepreneurs, independent contractors, or freelancers. During the past decade, these platforms quintupled: while in 2010 there were 142 online web-based and location-based (taxi and delivery) platforms, in 2020 this number increased to more than 777 (ILO, 2021: 19).

Despite the exponential growth of digital labor platforms, a large proportion of these companies are distributed in a few locations: the United States of America (twenty nine percent), India (eight percent), and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (five percent). Moreover, only four percent of the investment in digital labor platforms is in Latin America, Africa, and the Arab States, and around seventy percent of globally generated revenue in 2019 was concentrated in the United States and China. Regarding workers' incomes, in the so-called "developing" countries they are likely to earn up to 60 percent less than their peers in "developed" countries (ILO, 2021: 19-20, 23).

Given this global outlook, in Argentina, the phenomenon of digital platforms is relatively recent. By the beginning of 2016, only five platforms, all of them locally funded, were operating: MercadoLibre (marketplace for new and used goods and one of the top five tech companies in Latin America), Zolvers (home cleaning and care services), IguanaFix (maintenance and repair services for companies), Nubelo (crowdworking), and Workana (crowdworking). The change of political power in the national government by the end of 2015¹ created favorable conditions for the entry of foreign platforms, especially due to the deregulation of capital movements. From 2016 to 2018, at least seven new platforms and subsidiaries of foreign companies emerged and arrived (Madariaga, Buenadicha, Molina, & Ernst, 2019: 21-22). According to the last available data (2018), there are 22 digital platforms in the country (López Mourelo, 2020: 19).²

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Concerning workers, the group of people who had generated income at least once in 2018 through digital platforms in Argentina was around 160,000 (without considering MercadoLibre). Although the labor linked to platforms is characterized by a wide heterogeneity of tasks and skills, it is concentrated in the category of low-skilled physical services here (Madariaga et al., 2019: 65-67). Since they arrived in Argentina, these digital platforms have raised many controversies, especially in the labor field. As in many cities around the globe, while couriers held several protests and engaged in collective organizations to struggle for their rights, taxi drivers offered fruitless resistance to Uber and Cabify.

Besides these contentious episodes of worker resistance, various activists, scholars, workers, and practitioners around the world point at cooperativism as an alternative and counteraction. Around 2015, a new movement started to take shape: platform cooperativism. Nurtured mainly by scholarship, cooperativism, unionism, and open-source activism, platform cooperativism stands out as a counter-project with the power to confront job insecurity stemming from labor platforms, as well as other issues such as inequality, discrimination, increased control, and data exploitation. This movement promotes altering the technological heart of platform companies through a democratic ownership and governance model that reduces inequalities and distributes benefits among local communities (Scholz, 2016). This could enable taking advantage of the virtues of the internet (e.g. lowered transaction costs) to boost cooperatives and put the reproduction of life at the center of the model.

This study focuses on CoopCycle. This platform coop, which emerged in Europe, is both a bicycle-logistics digital infrastructure, and a federation of bike delivery cooperatives. The software (web platform and mobile apps) enables the worker cooperatives to manage their deliveries and to offer their services to restaurants, shops, and different clients. The open-source software is protected by a Coopyleft license, which guarantees its use by cooperatives or worker collectives only. The development of a delivery software available for cooperatives undoubtedly represents a milestone in the ecosystem of platform cooperativism: at present, there are more than 60 courier cooperatives, most of them in Western Europe, sharing the software and participating in the federation. However, the capacity of this platform co-op to scale in the Global South is not automatic nor necessarily desirable. In the case of Latin America, platform co-ops' local implementation processes have not been sufficiently documented.³

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This research⁴ analyzes the feasibility conditions for the local implementation of CoopCycle in Argentina, as well as the contributions of this localization process to the platform co-op and the federation on the whole. I aim to discuss the viability of a transnational and scalable digital cooperative platform, which is, at the same time, diverse, inter-cooperative, collaborative, and solidaristic. Moreover, since CoopCycle is the most advanced cooperative platform project in Argentina, this work also seeks to reflect on the opportunities and challenges of platform cooperativism in the country. The research design is based on a qualitative case study, and the main techniques are participant observation (virtual and in-person), semi-structured interviews, and documentary analysis.

The report is organized as follows. First, the theoretical perspective and the methodology strategy are delineated. Following, the main characteristics of CoopCycle as a software and a federation, as well its process of localization in Argentina are described. Afterwards, the positive factors, challenges, and obstacles for its localization in Argentina, together with the implications of this process in the scaling of CoopCycle are analyzed. Finally, the report concludes by outlining and discussing the main findings aiming to contribute to the strengthening of a transnational and socially empowering CoopCycle.

2.

THEORETICAL
PERSPECTIVE
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Cooperatives, scale, and social change

At the end of the twentieth century, the social and solidarity economy gained momentum in different parts of the world. Either as alternatives to systemic social change facing the crisis of real socialism or as palliative strategies aimed at vulnerable populations, there has been a proliferation of cooperatives, mutual associations, solidaristic finance schemes, and fair-trade networks, among other experiences. Overall, the social and solidarity economy has been conceived by different actors as an effective pathway to tackle the various issues raised by the capitalist mode of production.

Worker cooperatives theoretically depict one of the forms that are more disruptive to capitalist production since they lead to the elimination of the division between workers and owners of the means of production. Although generally constituting themselves as alternatives to unemployment rather than to capitalism (Quijano, 2011), they are proposed by the scholarship on social change as one of the avenues to advance in farther-reaching systemic changes that enable social power to control production and the embeddedness of economy in society (Alperovitz, 2006; De Sousa Santos and Rodríguez, 2011; Kasparian, 2022; Rebón, 2007; Salgado, 2012; Williams, 2014; Wright, 2015, 2019).

This idea is grounded in two premises. First, that capitalist economies are hybrid ecosystems with a capitalist dominance but not as an exclusivity of its structures or, in other terms, although some various non-capitalist economic structures and practices exist but are marginalized and dominated by capitalism. Second, expanding the spaces of social empowerment, born from bottom-up and interstitial strategies, could eventually and cumulatively erode the dominance of capitalism (Wright, 2015, 2019). Considered as institutional innovations that expand spaces of social empowerment (Wright, 2019) and as enlargers of economic imaginaries towards building diverse economies (Gibson-Graham, 2006a), worker cooperatives uncover the heterogeneous nature of social formations, and their potential lies in currently representing what would be desirable in a postcapitalist future.

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Within this general framework mainly of analytical Marxism and some approaches from the fields of social and solidarity economy (Coraggio 2008; Hintze 2013; Pastore 2006; Vázquez 2014), cooperativism (Vuotto, 1994), and economic sociology (Polanyi, 2007) in previous collective research (Rebón & Kasparian, 2020), we focused on the factors that collaborate towards the development, expansion and sustainability – both in the labor-economic dimension as well as in the associative dimension – of *empresas recuperadas* or worker-recuperated enterprises in Argentina.⁵ Our hypothesis is that the main factors that positively contribute to the consolidation of these emancipatory alternatives to capitalist production are the magnitude and type of resources inherited from the failed enterprise, the hegemony of a cooperative project that gives relevance to economic management, the ownership of the means of production, the development of commercially competitive goods and services within a framework of plural economic exchanges, the support granted by the State, the involvement in political and social networks, and context conditions (i.e., location and economic sector).

This research seeks to broaden the approach to include digital platform cooperatives. The combination of entrepreneurship as support for radicalized neoliberal rationality (Laval & Dardot, 2013) and the rise of platform capitalism (Srnicsek, 2018) brought with it new injustices and forms of insecurity at work. Unlike corporate digital infrastructures – which convey forms of domination and insecurity – these cooperatives pursue to offer digital infrastructures that engage all stakeholders, commit to transparent data management, and are aimed at solving the needs of the majorities.

A platform cooperative is “an enterprise that operates primarily through digital platforms for interaction or the exchange of goods and/or services and is structured in line with the International Cooperative Alliance Statement on the Cooperative Identity” (Mayo, 2019: 4). Hence, since forming cooperatives can run into legal and political obstacles (Pentzien, 2020), the core characteristic of these enterprises lies in their identity, regardless of the legal entity form adopted (Mannan & Pek, 2021). Even the degree to which technology is incorporated can vary; there are tech-driven projects, but also tech-enabled and low-tech ventures (Cohen, 2018; Cousin, September 2021). Moreover, there exist platform cooperatives, as well as cooperative-run platforms, where platforms are add-ons to the operations of the business (Mannan & Pek, 2021). Given that it is an emerging field, this diversity accounts for the breadth of the concept.

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The emancipatory nature of these experiences has been already highlighted in empirical research. Based on the analysis of 22 platform coops operating in taxi services, short-stay accommodation, food distribution, and domestic and home care services, Mayo Fuster Morell, Ricard Espelt, and Melissa Renau Cano (2021) indicate that these platforms favor horizontal relationships, by developing a community infrastructure respectful of the privacy that facilitates the participation of users in data governance, and addresses some of the negative externalities caused by the platform. Also, the possibilities of cooperatives to foster feminist platforms compared to corporate ventures seem to be higher (Kasparian, Súnico, Fajn, Cófreces, Grasas, Katz, & Vannini, 2021).

That being said, Fuster Morell et al. (2021) identify several challenges, among which the scale of impact and replicability of the projects stand out. In his study on cooperatives, Jason Spicer (2018) asserts that some degree of scale is necessary for an enterprise to be economically viable, and organizationally sustainable. One of the advantages of digital platforms is their potential to scale, that is, to grow thanks to the capacity to adapt and respond to the rise of the number, types, and locations of stakeholders, and therefore be functional in different contexts. Furthermore, given corporate platforms rely on network effects to support their business models directed at shaping monopolies (Srnicsek, 2018), it seems relevant to reflect on how platform co-ops can grow and be sustainable.

Scale, cooperation among cooperatives, and pooled resources have the potential to enhance a strategy that seeks to expand the weight of anti-capitalist structures and practices, transforming power relations (Wright, 2015; 2019). Nevertheless, from the perspective of cooperativism, scaling may be irrelevant and not even desirable for several reasons: scale is linked to profit-maximization and monopolistic tendencies, as well as to eluding socioeconomic and environmental costs (i.e., “externalities”) that cooperatives prefer to eliminate in order to benefit local communities (Spicer, 2018).

Since my interest rests upon analyzing the arrival of CoopCycle to Argentina, I point out two forms of geographical expansion found in the field of cooperativism: federated approaches and international multi-localization strategies. Fuster Morell et al. (2021) diagnose that many of the platform co-ops that achieve greater geographic expansion are part of federations. By putting into practice the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA)’s principle of cooperation among cooperatives, these kind of companies usually scale through federating,

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coordinating, or through networked strategies, which has also been more recently referred to as building cooperative ecosystems (Spicer, 2018). Forming federations is also recommended in order to produce positive network effects (McCann & Yazici, 2018), and as an alternative to globalization (Schneider, May 21, 2016).

This perspective tends to differ from international multi-localization strategies. Since the 1990s, Mondragón, one of the most emblematic cooperative experiences in the world, has deployed this approach which benefits employment and competitiveness in Basque parent cooperatives while increasing non-cooperator employment elsewhere, notably in China, Mexico, the Czech Republic, Brazil, Poland, and India (Barandiaran & Lezaun, 2017; Gibson-Graham; 2006b; Luzarraga & Irizar, 2012). The appropriation of the surplus produced by the non-cooperators of local and foreign subsidiaries outlines a type of group individualism that gives rise to exploitative class relations (Gibson-Graham, 2006b) against a backdrop of a dual or a 'coopitalist' model (Barandiaran & Lezaun, 2017). Drawing upon J. K. Gibson-Graham (2006b), it is opportune to highlight that these shortcomings, which emerged from the assessment of globalization as an imperative, are the object of struggle rather than failures immanent to the Mondragón experience, or cooperatives in general.

Attentive to this global dimension, impossible to elude even for cooperativism, scholarship about digital labor platforms has focused not only on job insecurity but also on digital colonialism (Guadamuz, December 30, 2017), and the new global division of labor for digital work (Anwar & Graham, 2020). These studies demonstrate it is necessary for a digital decolonial turn (Casilli, 2017) to examine current—and anchored in long-standing patterns of power—dynamics of social exclusion and exploitation in digital platforms.

A priori, CoopCycle represents a federated strategy. Of course, this does not mean that it automatically succeeds in developing linkages as an alternative to globalization, and its homogeneity premise. The analysis of this case study benefits from the transnational perspective linked to subaltern studies and postcolonial theory. Dipesh Chakrabarty's (2008) suggestion to provincialize Europe points out two guiding ideas. First, given that so-called "universal" European ideas that have very particular historical and space-related origins, they cannot aspire for universal validity. Thus, despite being indispensable to think about practices elsewhere, these ideas are not sufficient. Second, that manner of historicism and its notion of teleological stages generates the premise that vital practices beyond Europe are

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“backward” or, at most, “local variations” and “particular exceptions” of a general idea or practice originated in a center – conceived as homogeneous – and then irradiated to the rest of the globe.

The transnational perspective proposes a different way of observing interactions at a global scale: processes and transformations no longer follow a one-way direction; instead, they are grasped through the analyses of exchanges, collaborations, and reciprocal influences under patterns of circulation rather than dissemination (Weinstein, 2013). This implies that ideas and practices are reformulated from one context to another, that the origin of a given practice is less important than its context of circulation, implementation, and appropriation. Therefore, in this research, the Argentinian implementation of CoopCycle will not be analyzed in order to track the particular way in which the local case applies a given model, measuring the degree of variation and adequacy.

By analyzing the positive conditions and factors for the implementation of CoopCycle in Argentina, this research also contributes to the assessment of this platform’s co-op federated strategy to geographically grow. I aim to inquire into the scalability of the experience beyond Europe paying attention to the diverse contexts, the reciprocal influences, and the global asymmetries. Consequently, this work aims to reflect from a transnational perspective on the ways in which platforms co-ops can scale to enlarge spaces of social empowerment beyond the Global North.

Methodology

The methodological strategy of this work is grounded on a single qualitative case study (Stake, 2013) carried out during 2021. On the one hand, the case study is of an instrumental nature, since its analysis enables drawing conclusions on broader issues, such as scale, inter-cooperation, and local possibilities and constraints for platform cooperativism. On the other hand, CoopCycle is the most advanced process of platform cooperativism in the digital labor fields in Argentina. Hence, the case has intrinsic interest, and it could stand as a beacon for future experiences.

Drawing upon the aforementioned hypothesis about the consolidation of *empresas recuperadas* (Rebón & Kasparian, 2020), the following dimensions were identified as contributing to the feasibility – and at the same time posing challenges and certain limitations – of CoopCycle in Argentina: i) starting point, ii) context conditions regarding cooperative legal framework, iii) characteristics of cooperativism in Argentina, iv) urbanization, infrastructural context and bike delivery, v) organizational resources of the project, vi) role of the State, vii) participation in networks and building of platform cooperativism ecosystem, and viii) courier co-ops' incubation and accompanying model. While delving into the local dimension of the process, our interest also rested upon analyzing the scaling strategy of CoopCycle on the whole and assessing the possibilities of a transnational platform. Hence, when pertinent, the examination of these dimensions included the relations built between the local team and the European team of CoopCycle, as well as the implications of the Argentinian localization in the overall process.

The case was addressed by means of participant observation (virtual and in-person), semi-structured interviews, documentary analysis, and desk research. Participant observation was carried out during weekly—and sometimes daily—virtual work meetings of the team in charge of the implementation of CoopCycle in Argentina. The team is made up of 12 people from different worker co-ops of the *Federación Argentina de Cooperativas de Trabajo de Tecnología, Innovación y Conocimiento* [Argentinian Federation of Technology, Innovation and Knowledge Worker Cooperatives] (FACTTIC). The work meetings also included gatherings between the mentioned group with a board member of CoopCycle in Europe, an external team in charge of fund-seeking (mainly state funding but also intergovernmental organizations), institutions of the cooperative movement, and state officials interested in fostering platform cooperativism.

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Between observation and participation, my role was placed closer to participation (Guber, 2011). During fieldwork, I engaged in diverse activities, such as submitting a proposal to get public funding, interviewing a restaurant as a resource to outline a cooperative business model, collectively assessing the objectives and identity of the project as well as the territorial deployment of the platform in two in-person workshops, and presenting the experience of CoopCycle in Argentina together with the implementing team in a panel organized by FACTTIC. I also took part in some instances that lead to the creation of CoopCycle Latinoamérica. This method allowed for collecting data on all dimensions, and to a lesser degree, on contextual factors and dimensions.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five members of the localization and implementation team in Argentina. These were effective moments to delve into legal drivers and obstacles, the timeline of the localization process, as well as on organizational resources available to develop the project. Additionally, the research resorted to a documentary analysis of the localization team's presentations, internal documents, reports, and cooperative law and regulations. Some secondary sources—both academic and journalistic—gathered through desk research contributed to the characterization of FACTTIC.

To elaborate on CoopCycle origins and main characteristics, the study resorted to desk research (social media, journalistic articles, academic papers, and reports, among other sources), and analysis of onboarding documents. Additionally, I participated in a virtual dissemination talk given by CoopCycle aimed at scholars and researchers. Moreover, access to CoopCycle's Slack⁶ was a means to document exchanges and relations between all members of the federation. Finally, partial systematizations with members of the CoopCycle team in Argentina enabled a critical and fruitful integration of scientific knowledge and practical-situated knowledge.



3.

COOPCYCLE IN
ARGENTINA

CoopCycle: software and federation

CoopCycle is a digital infrastructure provider for bike delivery cooperatives and, at the same time, a federation that groups them. Its purpose is “to foster solidarity between coops, to reduce their costs thanks to services pooling and to create a common force to advocate courier’s rights” (CoopCycle webpage). These objectives imply working on the creation of an anti-capitalist economic model based on the Commons, the development of the CoopCycle software, the pursuit of political lobbying and global coordination, and the elaboration of a juridical toolbox (CoopCycle webpage).

This delivery platform co-op was founded in 2017 in France and expanded into different countries and regions. It was created by an association of volunteers, among which, a single person provided the software development. Although none of them was a courier, the project was, from earlier on, informed by the contributions and feedback of courier collectives. These had started to get in touch with the founder group by 2016, when some delivery platforms went bankrupt, or experienced worsened working conditions (Acosta Alvarado, Aufrère, & Srnec, 2021).

At present, the federation has 67 couriers’ collectives as members: 59 in Europe (most of them in Western Europe), 7 in North America (five of them in Mexico), and 1 in Australia (CoopCycle webpage). These groups of workers may not necessarily organize under the cooperative legal form. CoopCycle is open to bike delivery collectives that embrace the values and principles of social and fair economy and that commit to forming a cooperative within two years after signing the collaboration agreement with the federation (CoopCycle, n. d.).

The platform software enables cooperatives to manage deliveries (food delivery or foodtech, traditional courier services, and last-mile courier services) and to offer restaurants, shops, and other clients an e-commerce solution. The cooperative can manage and track tasks statuses in real time, manage restaurants and menus, and have their payment secured by the Stripe payment gateway. There are apps also available for restaurants, shops, and couriers. The CoopCycle software has a sui generis open-source code since the Coopyleft license allows the use of the software under two conditions: i) companies must use a cooperative model in which workers

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are employees; and ii) they must fit with the definition of social economy actors by the European Union. The code is available on Github,⁷ but the companies must meet the aforementioned conditions to use it.

The software has some notable characteristics. Both for principles and lack of resources, CoopCycle has chosen not to collect and analyze data. By using OpenStreetMap,⁸ the platform contributes to the strengthening of this tool as an alternative to Google Maps, which charges fees for its utilization. Though inspired by the Deliveroo platform, CoopCycle has an additional and fundamental difference: there is no algorithmic management of work processes nor workers' performance. The software does not assess and rate workers, nor does it deploy gamification strategies. Quite on the contrary, a human dispatcher assigns deliveries to couriers; workers can be geo-tracked by cooperatives (but not by customers); and there are no features that enable customers to evaluate workers.

Service pooling is not only about software and mobile apps. CoopCycle also assists with commercial offering, funding, insurances, and training. Moreover, the federation guarantees instant payments for cooperatives, visibility through a well-known brand, and administrative and legal services. As opposed to venture-capital funding in corporate platforms, all these services are sustained by annual contributions from its members and, to a lesser degree, by contributions from restaurants and shops, public subventions, services in kind, the CoopCycle association, and volunteering work. Both the subscription policy and the funds' allocation are democratically decided and managed by members. It has been established that the funds are allocated to IT infrastructure, communication actions, and salaries for three roles of the federation: IT development, sales, and coordination.

The platform co-op is governed democratically by the cooperatives. Through Slack, meetings, and papers, the organization fosters deliberation and collaborative building—rather than sharing—of knowledge. At Slack, deliberation goes from ownership models and legal issues to bugs in the software and the proposal of new features. As for decision-making, besides the annual assembly developed since 2018, Loomio⁹ offers an effective tool to channel discussions and enable voting.

In 2019, the association involved since the beginning of CoopCycle started a governance transition, and a professionalization of CoopCycle's structure (Acosta Alvarado et al., 2021). The governance model transitioned from an association

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to a federation in 2021 when the couriers elected the members of the first board (CoopCycle, December 2021). The board is constituted of 10 people, primarily from the delivery cooperatives coming from six countries: two finance directors, two software directors, two onboarding directors, one director of rules and regulations, the president of the board of directors, a coordinator representing the employees of the federation, and a member of the volunteer association with advisory tasks.

In addition to the associative and organizational achievements, CoopCycle has grown and consolidated as an economic project. 2020 was a year of great expansion: the organization recruited the first two employees through the CoopCycle federation, expanded to three new countries (Canada, Poland, and Sweden) out of a total of seven, incorporated 40 new collectives within the federation, and achieved over 3.5 million€ in cumulative turnover (CoopCycle, January 21, 2021). Given these successes, current challenges comprise the following: internal communication of the political project, training needed to overcome the lack of understanding of cooperativism among new members, and further deliberation on the path the organization should take (Field-notes, May 2021).

Another major challenge for CoopCycle is its growth beyond Europe. After two years of joint work and exchanges with the European team, CoopCycle Latinoamérica was officialized in December of 2021. This network has members from Argentina, Uruguay,¹⁰ Chile,¹¹ and Mexico,¹² where their experiences are at a pilot stage. Among its participants, there are both courier collectives in their initial stages of organization, and actors interested in implementing CoopCycle and fostering platform coops, such as federations, state bodies, and universities. As one of its promoters points out: "I think joint work is the most efficient that there could be and although I celebrate convergence, if I can, I don't choose it, I prefer creating links. Given we are few, let's keep close" (Member 1 of FACTTIC and of the team of CoopCycle in Argentina, November 2021). Consequently, the objective of the network is to discuss and collectively address shared technical and territorial challenges.

Main characteristics and timeline of the local implementation

In Argentina, the emergence of digital labor cooperative platforms can be better understood as a process for addressing the issue of digital labor than as mere providers of digital infrastructures (Pentzien, 2020). Since they arrived in Buenos Aires and other cities in Argentina, digital platforms have been in the spotlight due to contentious events held by couriers, who eventually formed their organizations to demand labor rights and better working conditions. On July 15, 2018, workers of delivery platforms held a protest in Buenos Aires that reported the first such collective action in Latin America. A month later, the Asociación de Personal de Plataformas [Platform Personnel Association] (APP) was formed. This organization aims to represent workers of food delivery and ride-hailing platforms. These conflicts and collective organization processes were some of the reasons that triggered the localization of CoopCycle in the country.

In 2020, the Federación Argentina de Cooperativas de Trabajo de Tecnología, Innovación y Conocimiento [Argentinian Federation of Technology, Innovation and Knowledge Worker Cooperatives] (FACTTIC) started the local implementation of this platform. That same year, the federation gained the first state grant to develop the necessary software adaptations for the localization (i.e., changing the gateway and setting local taxes). Later in the year, the federation obtained a second state grant to accompany and strengthen the first courier coops that would use the platform. FACTTIC considers this project as part of a broader strategy to promote platform cooperativism in the country, which also includes ventures in the media and care services sectors. Besides, this federation of tech worker cooperatives has had a prominent role in the creation of CoopCycle Latinoamérica and the expansion of CoopCycle to Chile and Uruguay.

As the project moved forward in the national arena, the FACTTIC team was in touch with the European founder group, which provided support and guidance. Nonetheless, the formal admission of the Argentinian project into the network of CoopCycle did not arrive until mid-2021. Like other countries in Latin America, many workers in the delivery sector in Argentina use motorbikes, while CoopCycle in Europe is committed to bike delivery as a way of contributing to the decrease of pollution and environmental sustainability. To overcome this potential crash of values¹³ that could have caused the bifurcation of these regional projects, FACTTIC

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elaborated a proposal for a transportation transition of three years for Argentinian worker co-ops, which was approved by CoopCycle federation after a circulation of drafts, comments, exchanges, debates and voting through Loomio (FACTTIC, February 18, 2021; April 7, 2021; May 3, 2021). The “Transportation Transition Proposal Plan” suggests:

A transition scheme so that the development of platform cooperatives in the region is accompanied by the gradual modification of the means of transport towards sustainable means of transport (...) based on entry and permanence requirements, the generation of incentives, and the construction of agreements with local actors. (FACTTIC, May 3, 2021: 2)

With respect to environmental sustainability, the proposal establishes that the worker collectives which join have at least 20% of their transportation through sustainable means, to begin with. The annual fee paid by each courier coop in order to sustain pooled resources increases according to the percentage of non-sustainable means of transportation. These additional payments are complemented with discounts that reward progress in the transition processes, strictly structured with time limits, annual controls, and economic penalties. The scheme also comprises awareness and dissemination actions on environmental issues by FACTTIC, and the development of linkages with the state to facilitate the purchase of bicycles (FACTTIC, May 3, 2021). It is worth mentioning that this plan has not been put into practice yet, as Argentinian co-ops are at the pilot stage.

Currently, the socio-technological adaptation of the platform is advanced. This includes the software along with the adaptation of legal documents and agreements that rule the use of the platform. Both Mexico and Argentina have been collaborating in the development of new functionalities in line with local realities. Among these functionalities, the inclusion of cash payment stands out. At first glance, this could seem an improvement only for Latin American societies, where financial inclusion still has a long way to go. 1.7 billion adults remained unbanked on a global scale in 2017. Even as account ownership grew, the gender gap (7 %) and the gap between the richer and the poorer (13 %) persisted, both in “developed” and “developing” countries. Account ownership was also lower among young adults, the less educated, and those who were out of the labor force (Demirgüç-Kunt, Klapper, Singer, Ansar, & Hess, 2018: 4).

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CoopCycle in Argentina involves two courier co-ops at pilot stage. The FACTTIC team has already deployed the first server instance and has been accompanying these worker collectives not only in the use of the software, but also to get the cooperative license, improve their technological infrastructure, to organize work processes, access training in this area, to acquire insurance and a bank account, among other needs. Moreover, several demonstrations have been organized to disseminate information about the project and popularize it. In addition, the federation is attempting to create an ecosystem that provides a sustainable, local identity to the project. In this regard, for instance, the team has been working together with the Provincial Direction of Cooperative Action of Buenos Aires (DIPAC) for the elaboration of a business model. Together with the Gino Germani Research Institute (University of Buenos Aires) and the University of Quilmes, FACTTIC has drawn up—and recently started to execute—projects to develop socio-economic circuits grounded in networks of key actors in each territory. Subsequently, the report delves into the positive factors, challenges, and limitations identified in the localization of CoopCycle in Argentina, and the implications of this process in the scaling of the platform co-op as a whole.

4.

POSITIVE
FACTORS,
CHALLENGES,
LIMITATIONS

Starting point

The Argentinian experience is undoubtedly enhanced by the starting point, that is, the type and scale of resources the local project receives from the European federation. We refer to productive assets in the broader sense, understanding them as the set of factors that may be utilized productively. These can include production tools, facilities, symbolic capital of the brand, working community, and networks with suppliers and clients (Rebón & Kasparian, 2020). The availability of the open-source software already developed in Europe accounts for a major advantage. The fact that the Coopyleft license establishes the exclusive use by cooperatives represents a protection of the project against the harshest market principle.

Moreover, in CoopCycle's resource pooling strategy, intangible assets such as brand, management models, training, commercial assistance, and support networks, stand out. Throughout the localization process, the European team accompanied the local team to hold several meetings where knowledge on technical features and documents on collaboration agreements, types of services supported by the software, and economic and organizational models were shared. It is worth mentioning that during the pilot stage of the experiences, this exchange is fully grounded in reciprocity: neither the Mexican (Barrera-Flores et al., 2021) nor the Argentinian courier co-ops are yet contributing the annual fee. In exchange, a developer from Mexico—financed by a non-governmental organization based in that country—and another from Argentina—financed by a grant of the Argentinian State—contributed to the development of the software, besides working on each localization processes.

Legal framework

One further main factor is the legal framework regarding cooperative law and regulations. The multi-stakeholder cooperative legal framework is gaining supporters as it seems to be the most adequate figure to integrate the different social groups that take part in platform co-ops (Vidal, 2022). This form allows for combining in a single project, the different stakeholders typically found in cooperatives: workers, producers, and users. Although Argentinian cooperative law does not correspond with this framing, current perspectives are favorable to its development.

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According to a specialist in cooperative organizational models and member of an Argentinian cooperative confederation, it is not necessary to reform local legal frameworks—in particular, Cooperatives Act no. 20,337 – in order to build multi-stakeholder co-ops (Field-notes, December 2021). He suggests that the current models of geographical districts designed for big cooperatives could be hacked by the local platform cooperativism movement. Consequently, instead of the geographical rationale for big cooperatives, districts could be determined under a functionality rationale. For instance, we could think of courier “districts,” user “districts,” and collaborators “districts.” Even though it seems likely that the Argentinian authority responsible for the enforcement of the cooperative legal regime would approve these ad hoc regulations, no cooperative has been created under this model so far.

In contrast, the nature of the link between workers and cooperatives poses a challenge for the local implementation of CoopCycle. In France, courier co-ops generally organize as société coopérative de production (SCOP). This legal framework allows for salaried employment among workers with the possibility of eventually becoming a member of the cooperative. In fact, only around 30% of workers in French courier co-ops federated in CoopCycle are its members (Field-notes, May 2021).

Unlike France, Argentinian Cooperatives Act no. 20,337 stipulates an associational—non-labor—link between workers and the co-operative, and only provides for some exceptions, according to which workers’ entry to the productive unit may be subject to a salaried employment relationship for a limited period. On the one hand, this local legal feature tends to assure the associative and democratic nature of cooperatives. However, on the other hand, not being salaried employees, co-operative members are considered self-employed, especially with regards to social security. This generally means less protection and labor rights than salaried workers. Hence, worker co-ops of all kinds in Argentina face the challenge of achieving better social security conditions and, even more, in the case of CoopCycle experiences, since they are in their pilot stages.

Cooperative movement and platform co-op experiences

A key factor to assess the feasibility of the local implementation of CoopCycle is the magnitude and density of cooperative movement. In Argentina, cooperatives shape a consolidated movement, and worker cooperatives are a widespread legal form for worker organization (Kasparian, 2022; Rebón & Kasparian, 2015). COOPERAR, the Argentinian Confederation of Cooperatives, gathers 70 federations from 15 economic sectors representing approximately 5,000 co-ops (COOPERAR webpage).

Despite lacking consolidated data on the magnitude of the sector, information on the co-ops' registration update acts as a proxy towards measuring it. By mid-2019, 8,618 co-ops with a total of 17,818,197 members had updated their registration. Among those organizations, 4,365 were worker co-ops with 115,728 worker members (INAES, 2019). However, platform cooperatives are still at an embryonic stage. They are scarce and, in some cases, not yet fully operating. Besides the local implementation of CoopCycle, I have recollected information on eight experiences and projects—at different stages—which relate to platform cooperativism (Table no. 1). In sum, though incipient, platform co-ops have a consolidated and rich soil of cooperativism to grow over.

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Table 1. Experiences of Platform Cooperatives in Argentina

Name	Brief Description	Webpage/Further Information
Caracol.Ar	Collaborative platform and community of care made up of families, children, and caregivers, who build a child-care system under cooperative values.	https://caracol.ar/
Clementina	Platform to boost funding for cooperative projects aimed at local development, sustainability, inclusion, and Human Rights. For the moment, Clementina has developed an educational platform.	https://clementina.coop/ https://campus.clementina.coop/
CoopCycle	Digital infrastructure provider for delivery cooperatives.	https://coopcycle.org/en/
ESSApp	App to connect the ventures of the social and solidarity economy with users and consumers.	https://www.essapp.coop/
Gestara	Directory of cooperative products, services, and social economy organizations.	https://gestara.com.ar/
Nutrir App	Public platform developed by a tech worker co-op, that collects, centralizes, and diagnoses data on food and nutrition in soup kitchens and community canteens.	https://youtu.be/-it7m-dOxDQ
Portal de tiendas	Marketplace software for cooperatives.	https://www.portaldetiendas.coop/
Proyecto Chasqui	E-commerce of products of the social and solidarity economy, developed by a university, software co-ops, and consumer co-ops.	https://proyechasqui.com/
Red de Medios Alternativos	Digital media where local media cooperatives can benefit from shared software that aggregates news with a geographical criterion.	n. d.

Note: Prepared by the author based on desk research and key informants.

Urbanization, infrastructure, and bike delivery

Urban infrastructure is a key element to assess the feasibility of implementing CoopCycle, as the delivery sector depends on the availability of a critical mass of users typically located in urban areas. On top of this, CoopCycle is a bike delivery platform, which is why specific transportation infrastructure is needed to assure an enabling context. Some socioeconomic and cultural aspects complete the picture of the situation.

Argentina is one of the most urbanized countries in the world and the second most urbanized in Latin America, with an urban population that reaches 92% of the total (UN Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, 2019). However, there are great imbalances and inequalities in terms of population density, infrastructure, road traffic safety, and quality of urban life. While urbanization processes have been generally linked to social integration and reduction of inequities, in Latin America, urbanization has been grounded on structural inequalities (Di Virgilio & Perelman, 2014).

One of the key insights lies in the extensive nature of the urbanization pattern. To take the case of the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area, as the urbanization process irradiates from the center, peripheral areas grow extensively, instead of following an intensive pattern. Hence, instead of having densely inhabited and integrated urban nodes, the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires offers a wide dispersion of population, and either a lack of or deficient services in the suburbs (Fernández Bouzo & Tobías, 2020).

With respect to bike use and infrastructure, according to a survey carried out by ILO and the Ministry of Labor in Argentina, 73% of couriers polled in corporate delivery platforms in the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires use bikes as the main means of transportation (López Mourelo, 2020: 62). During the pandemic, the use of bikes increased by 27% in Buenos Aires City (Ámbito, June 3, 2021) and the main cities of the country have bike lanes or cycle tracks. In Buenos Aires, there are more than 250 kilometers of bike lanes together with a system of bike public transport (Government of Buenos Aires City, n.d.).

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Nonetheless, bike lanes do not extend into the suburbs of the city, where, for example, one of the pilot experiences joining CoopCycle is located. In addition, motorbikes remain the best option for couriers outside food delivery due to cultural patterns (Rodríguez, 2008), and cost-related issues (FACTTIC, February 18, 2021). Currently, there are around seven million motorbikes in Argentina, which generally have a small engine capacity that enable lower fuel costs (FACTTIC, February 18, 2021).

In sum, all these elements account for an unequal urban and infrastructural context. If the transportation transition proposed by FACTTIC had not been approved, the Argentinian project would have been allowed to use the software without taking part in the federation and, probably, CoopCycle would have consolidated its European identity. This could have pointed to a limitation of such an alternative project, for conditions and realities of the Global North. However, a fact that could have resulted in a barrier to scale in the Global South led to a collective and open reflection of the European federation on their values, which resulted in prioritizing solidarity, inter-cooperation, and diversity. On the other side of the exchange, it enabled the Argentinian process to reflect on the environmental dimension of the project and to consider elaborating its own green pathway.

Organizational resources

A fundamental element that enables the localization process are the organizational resources available within the promoter group. FACTTIC, founded in 2012 by approximately 10 tech cooperatives, currently gathers more than 30 such co-ops. This triplication was surrounded by different challenges, among them, the need to boost participation, improve communication and develop capacities to engage in joint projects surpassing individual co-ops' capacities. This diagnosis was elaborated by a specific space within the federation called Flujo Intercooperativo de Trabajo [Intercooperative Workflow] (FIT). This is where FACTTIC members inter-cooperate in productive and commercial issues: work opportunities are shared, collective capacities and needs are assessed, and inter-cooperative groups of workers are gathered to address big projects.

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When the project of locally implementing CoopCycle received funding, an open call within this space was launched and two co-ops took charge of the localization. The project management was undertaken by two workers from other co-ops. One of them had brought the idea and experiences of platform co-ops and CoopCycle into the federation. Surrounding this team, an extended group of FACTTIC members interested in platform co-ops closely followed and supported the process while learning about the issue and the platform. Currently, the inter-cooperative group in charge of the local implementation of CoopCycle is integrated by 12 workers from eight tech co-ops.

This model of collaboration was also applied beyond national boundaries. Since 2019, FACTTIC began to get in touch with a network of tech co-ops in the United Kingdom. As a result of these exchanges, there currently exists a global network of 45 co-ops from 14 countries, within which, approximately 10 inter-cooperative projects are being deployed. In this venture lies one of the main resources of FACTTIC, from the perspective of the local implementation of CoopCycle: the federation holds almost 10 years of inter-cooperative practice that contributes not only to gathering a diverse group around the localization process, but also to fostering a collaborative exchange with the founder group in Europe and with the newly created Latin American group.

A second positive factor related to FACTTIC's work is the status of a 'strategic project' attributed to CoopCycle within the federation:

We define it as strategic because of the magnitude of the project, because of the links that we generate from it, the visibility it generates FACTTIC [for] working on this, because of the social impact, because of the capacity to change realities it represents, because of the capacity to create new cooperatives through the project, (...) because of the number of cooperatives that are inter-cooperating to work, as well. (Member 2 of FACTTIC and of the team of CoopCycle in Argentina, September 2021)

The technological world is being overwhelming and being able to dedicate the workforce to projects that we know have a social impact, which are transformative, to be able to put the workforce there, seems to me that it is also a message from the federation on technology [sic]. Knowing that there is

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an intention from the technological sector to develop other things that are not being developed in the world today. (Member 3 of FACTTIC and of the team of CoopCycle in Argentina, September 2021)

Well, from our privileged situation, how could the technological sector help precarious workers and the rest of the sectors within cooperativism that had been marginalized during the pandemic? CoopCycle fitted [sic]. (...) Everyone thought it was good, from our privileged situation of economic stability, being able to make a big impact on delivery workers. (...) CoopCycle is strategic because we are strongly working to end with precarity in a sector of our society [sic]. (Member 1 of FACTTIC and of the team of CoopCycle in Argentina, November 2021)

Localization of CoopCycle presents a three-fold objective for FACTTIC. First, to consolidate the federation as a key technological player of platform cooperativism, given “it wouldn’t be logic[-al] for platform coops to develop software with conventional companies. (...) We develop software considering cooperatives’ issues and with our values we would create a platform” (Member 2 of FACTTIC and of the team of CoopCycle in Argentina, September 2021). Second, to contribute to solving a current social issue through cooperative values and from the technological sector. Finally, to enhance inter-cooperation within the local federation.

Being a strategic project enables different types of resources. Among institutional resources, we could enumerate the following: CoopCycle has a slot assigned in monthly assemblies; the federation’s communication department takes the dissemination of the project outwards; and there is an open inter-cooperative working group in charge of the implementation. Besides these, the whole organizational structure of the federation is geared towards potential disposal of the project. This structure is composed of 11 spaces (Board, Innovation, Links, Knowledge, FIT, Communication, Strategic Projects, Cooperative Culture, Youth, Management, Inter-cooperative Feminist Space), the monthly assembly, and the biannual plenary session (FACTTIC, 2021).

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With respect to less institutionalized resources that the strategic status enables, the central element arises when looking at the group of workers participating in the implementation of CoopCycle. The cooperative that first included the issue of platform cooperativism into the federation's concerns is one of the cooperatives that had a leading role in the creation of FACTTIC. The current President of the Board as well as its Secretary and the former President participate in the localization group. Most of the members of this group take part in different collective spaces of the federation. As one of the members emphasizes:

We aren't developing software for Europe or the United States of America, for a start-up to try to get investments to create a unicorn, [but] it's another logic [that] we are backing here. That's why there is so much activism. (Member 2 of FACTTIC and of the team of CoopCycle in Argentina, September 2021)

As well as accounting for a positive factor, the previous interview fragment also points at a major limitation: the project depends too much on the activism, and work paid indirectly by the co-ops that each of the workers is a member of. Despite having gained two state grants that ensure the progress of the local implementation, the contribution of activism and tech co-ops continue being fundamental. It is still necessary to consolidate regular and sufficient financing schemes, economic resources, and a business model. In the following section, the report delves into the role of the state for the feasibility of the local implementation of CoopCycle.

Role of the state

The support granted by the state at its different levels is another important element. We could even affirm that it was a crucial factor for triggering the local implementation of CoopCycle: “the localization was an idea, a project, and we asked for state funding. When the grant came out, we said ‘well, we have the funding, shall we start? Shall we bring CoopCycle here?’” (Member 2 of FACTTIC and of the team of CoopCycle in Argentina, September 2021). As we stated previously, the local implementation of the platform co-op has been supported by activism, working hours provided by the tech coops involved, and, mainly, by state funding. So far, FACTTIC has received two grants from the state.

The first grant was obtained in mid-2020, and it was allocated to the localization of CoopCycle. In other words, this funding resulted in the adaptation of the software. By this period, this adaptation included developing certain changes, for example, the payment gateway needed to be developed since the one used in Europe does not operate in Latin America; setting local taxes; and localizing maps. In the framework of this project, FACTTIC, together with COOPERAR, elaborated a model of regulation for multi-stakeholder coops. This phase of localization was taken by a group of four workers from different worker co-ops supported by an extended group of FACTTIC members.

The second grant was obtained towards the end of 2020, and executed during 2021. The funding represented a nominal quadruplication of the first grant. The objective was to accompany courier collectives, to document, and to systematize information. For that purpose, FACTTIC got in touch with at least 11 collectives and cooperatives, 5 organizations interested in fostering platform co-ops, 5 governmental agencies from different levels, and 2 public research institutes and universities. As I finished writing this report, the project had succeeded in enrolling two courier co-ops at a pilot stage.

From the first technical-oriented moment followed a need for a more complex organization (for example: task division, definition of positions, workflows) that included training and communication tasks, as well as legal and commercial issues. During 2021, the number of workers involved in the local implementation rose from 4 to 12, and the project started to nurture from collaborating with different actors from the social and solidarity economy. Added to this increase in the number of members, the team also started to devote more working hours to the project.

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With this funding, the team was able to incorporate a full-time developer, who not only works in the local implementation of the software, but also became part of the developing team of CoopCycle. Additionally, the team received two more state grants: one from the government of the Buenos Aires Province, and another from the Ministry of Science, Technology, and Innovation of Argentina.

State support also complements political support besides economic aid. Various state bodies have shown interest in the project, and the FACTTIC team has held several meetings with state officials to disseminate it. For instance, the Provincial Direction of Cooperative Action (DIPAC) is providing aid to design a business model suitable for CoopCycle in Argentina. Furthermore, though not necessarily linked to CoopCycle nor platform cooperativism, two resolutions of national scope introduced in 2020 and 2021 shape a more favorable framework for cooperatives in general, and some sectors relevant to platform cooperativism as well.

Resolution no. 581/20 of the Instituto Nacional de Asociativismo y Economía Social [National Institute of Associativism and Social Economy] (INAES) abrogated a previous resolution (no. 1510/94) approved in the 1990s when the use of worker cooperatives as a way of reducing labor costs through the concealment of the wage relationship became widespread. Thus, the said resolution prohibited the constitution of worker co-ops of cleaning services and correspondence distribution because they were considered economic activities prone to disguise wage relationships under associated work.

Resolution no. 1000/21 of INAES titled “Renovar” (in English, renew or update) was approved in June 2021. This implied a major change in the legal regime of mutual societies and cooperatives of all types, given that it seeks to streamline, improve, and simplify procedures applicable to the different periods in the lifetime of such entities. In line with the international cooperative field, it reduces the minimum number of members required to form worker co-ops from six to three. This is believed to trigger the creation of more worker co-ops, especially in the tech services and platform cooperativism sector.

In sum, state support has proven to be a key positive factor for the local implementation of CoopCycle and, also, for the process on the whole, since it has enabled the incorporation of a developer to the team that already worked in Europe. Nevertheless, at least two challenges arise within this dimension. First, access to funding depends on the presentation of projects. This generates a

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consistent workload for the team, involving drawing up proposals that have been partially addressed with independent contractors (which are specialized in the search of financing opportunities for civil society organizations). However, the involvement of the FACTTIC team remains important during the formulation of the projects, and, hence, it could be necessary to assign a specific position for this task. Second, this aspect of state grants had already proven that a specific post for book-keeping and balance-taking was necessary. However, the fact remains that the procedure stipulated by the State can be cumbersome, especially for a nationwide federation:

It does seem to me that it could be streamlined, simplified in some way, or not so rigorous when it comes to having to carry it [federation book] physically... To sign the agreement [with the state body to get the funding], we were able, for example, to present the signature legalized by a notary public. Well, it's a step. But, for a federation, if we want there to be federations that we know are nationwide, there should be a much more practical system. (Member 3 of FACTTIC and of the team of CoopCycle in Argentina, September 2021)

That said, the legal resolution no. 1000 of 2021 seems to be a great step forward concerning procedure and paperwork required to cooperatives. As one of the interviewees affirms:

I can see they are trying to do many things so that they remain. With the new resolution now, there is an online associate book... All remains and that is a real hit for the entire sector. While [private] companies do everything through their computers, we have to send signed hardcopies, photocopies... That is letting the sector die. (...) They [INAES] aim at the youth, if not, in 15 years there will be nothing left of cooperativism. (Member 1 of FACTTIC and of the team of CoopCycle in Argentina, November 2021)

This quote encapsulates a fundamental limitation for cooperativism in Argentina: the difficulties that come with achieving continuity in state support, and for funding in the framework of long-term public policies. In the case of CoopCycle, FACTTIC and the building of a platform cooperativism ecosystem could counteract this towards a long-term support system and corresponding policies.

Participation in Networks and Building of Platform Cooperativism Ecosystem

Another critical factor regarding access to resources, and feasibility of the project is the creation of networks with other actors. As part of FACTTIC, CoopCycle in Argentina has been building bridges with federations and networks, universities and state bodies, foundations and non-governmental organizations, cooperative financial institutions, national associations, and other cooperatives. These links bring in political and economic resources to advance the process and are seen by local team members as steps towards the consolidation of a platform cooperativism ecosystem in Argentina and the region.

The political and social relations with this diverse set of actors enable the project to gain territoriality, that is, the capacity to scale throughout the country as well as the region. For instance, links with a national chamber of telecommunication cooperatives could consolidate a nationwide technological infrastructure partner for the project. Also, they furnish the project with various types of knowledge. Exchanges with the local implementation team in Mexico provide both technical and incubation knowledge. These networks also contribute to potential clients and cooperative suppliers. CoopCycle in Argentina already benefits from legal advice, as well as insurance and cooperative training for worker collectives joining the project, provided by cooperatives and foundations of the social and solidarity economy. Participation of said cooperative actors facilitates the local implementation:

Being able to operate within the sector with accountants, lawyers who cover the entire legal aspect, and from the cooperative logic is a luxury. It happened to us at the beginning when we wanted to set up the cooperative with any given accountant and they had no idea of cooperatives. (...) If you cannot formalize [the cooperative], cooperativism does not exist. There may be associativism but not cooperativism. I believe that TES in this project is key because it solves the formalization of all the cooperatives that we want to set up. This is a cooperative multiplication project. (...) And also, from a cooperative logic, for example, when we started with TES they did not charge you until you had a positive balance sheet. That logic does not exist outside of cooperativism. TES also wants there to be more cooperatives. (Member 1 of FACTTIC and of the team of CoopCycle in Argentina, November 2021)

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Before having the cooperative license, the courier co-op had to contract personal insurances. What we did with the [cooperative] bank was to see the possibility to contract the insurances individually at a reasonable cost so that later when they had the cooperative license, they could contact insurance collectively. The cooperative bank understands this and other hybrid situations that happen during the process. (...) It's ideological, they understand the issue, and the cooperative framework begins to be generated, which is what happens to any cooperative in any other field. And what we try to do is always put together that framework, be it to consume cooperatives, to serve cooperatives, it seems to me that it is to promote cooperativism. (Member 3 of FACTTIC and of the team of CoopCycle in Argentina, September 2021)

A challenge for the future is to create links with the aforementioned platform co-op experiences in the country. This could contribute to the further acknowledgment of CoopCycle, as well as to the sustainability of the project, the strengthening of the courier co-ops' incubation, and development of the accompanying model outlined below.

Courier co-ops incubation and accompanying model

Erik Olin Wright (2017) identifies several paths to setting up co-operatives, grouped in four kinds of formation: autonomous, incubated, guided by another co-operative, and those formed by the conversion of private enterprises. In 2003, the Argentinian national state launched a series of schemes to promote worker cooperativism in the social and solidarity economy as a job creation strategy. This state-led incubation period between 2003 and 2015 had a great impact on cooperativism (Kasparian, 2022).

The establishment of worker cooperatives through government schemes especially after 2009 altered the shape of the sector: by 2012, 76% of active cooperatives fell under public policy (Acosta, Levin and Verbeke, 2013). Cooperatives' activities were grounded in state demand and focused on housing, social infrastructure, and the maintenance of public spaces (Vuotto, 2011). These experiences brought about diverse results in terms of social empowerment. In several co-ops, state power predominated over workers' self-management, resulting in co-management arrangements. Nevertheless, one of the successes of this state incubation process

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was that it enabled exercising associationism, especially when social organizations took part in the creation and management of these co-ops (Arcidiácono & Bermúdez, 2015; Hintze, 2018; Hopp, 2021; Kasparian, 2022).

Consequently, compared to state incubation, the co-ops breeding co-ops pathway (Wright, 2017) seems to bear the potentiality of promoting greater social empowerment. FACTTIC has taken the task of incubating courier collectives and accompanying them in the process of creating and formalizing co-ops, as well as adapting work processes in order to use the platform. This goes in line with the federation's identity:

Somehow, I feel that the federation is a kind of incubator of cooperatives as well. You join in, if you have administrative doubts, you have the management space to help you; you need a job, you start to participate in the FIT, and you can take job opportunities. In a way, it helps incubate cooperatives. During this process of generating the federation, that initial group self-incubated, and I think that is what continues to be replicated. (Member 2 of FACTTIC and of the team of CoopCycle in Argentina, September 2021)

Even so, various limits and challenges have arisen in the process. After the first step of adapting the software, the local implementation, especially when accompanying worker collectives in precarious situations, collided with the difficulties imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Barriers for in-person meetings with the worker collectives due to social distancing, and the crisis in the gastronomic sector as a consequence also of the economic crisis, among other issues, slowed down the pilot experiences. Added to the pandemic's impact, the learning process to incorporate the use of the platform also posed limits. First, having access to a computer to learn how to use the platform was an issue, which FACTTIC addressed with donations or lending of computers. Second, in some cases, the incorporation of the software into work processes overlapped with the formalization of co-ops. This generated a complex scenario, given that the co-ops joining the project are generally formed by small worker collectives with unstable incomes and living conditions.

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What I see in the practice, that is, the real thing that happens when accompanying a pre-cooperative... it seems to me that we have to take into account that there are times, times that are much longer than what we expect and that we have to take them into account because sometimes we expect a lot and a cooperative that is in the process of creating itself is solving a lot of things, in addition to using the app. (Member 3 of FACTTIC and of the team of CoopCycle in Argentina, September 2021)

Gaining a critical mass is a requirement for any business, and in particular for those in the platform economy: more users and clients make the platform more attractive, and consequently engage even more users. This represents the current challenge of the local implementation of CoopCycle. The initial focus on incubating and accompanying courier collectives has shifted towards a perspective that includes this incubation process into the creation of territorial socio-economic circuits, or, in other words, “cared environments for the cooperatives”.

The objectives changed because we understood more and more. At first, the objective was to understand what CoopCycle was and get in touch, create links. When we achieved that goal, our objective was to bring it [to Argentina] and we thought that bringing CoopCycle to Argentina was to adapt it technologically. We adapted it technologically. (...) And the third objective was to raise courier cooperatives. We thought that in three months we were going to have a cooperative, and later we realized that it was more complicated. (...) We realized that what we must do, that this is what we are doing now, is to work the territory [sic]. We are in the part of developing the territories, and then empowering courier cooperatives that already exist or incubate it in a, let's say, pre-armed or cared for territory. [What we must do is] to generate cared environments for the cooperatives, develop territories rather than empowering isolated cooperatives. (Member 1 of FACTTIC and of the team of CoopCycle in Argentina, November 2021)

As a result of a learning process and the progressive acknowledgment of the social dimension of technology functioning (Muñoz Cancela & Monti, in press), this transformation seeks to overcome the limits, and tackle the challenges by resorting to locally-rooted collective actors gathered in local round-tables. The strategy is to link chambers, guilds, cooperatives, social and solidarity organizations, suppliers, media, local and provincial governments, universities, financial institutions, and other actors interested in promoting CoopCycle, to create socio-economic circuits

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where courier collectives can make a living out of delivery services. This shifting in the incubation model implies “scaling the accompanying model”:

We are devoting a lot of effort to these first experiences, but I don't know if we will be able to sustain this level of accompanying[sic] if we have thirty cooperatives, or if we have five more. How do we do from the business model to sustain this? Undoubtedly, some of the income that it generates has to go to support the team accompanying [sic] because if not, it is going to remain only in the activism and that is going to be sustained until it can no longer be sustained. There has to be a way in which activism is the first impulse but then the process sustains over time. The first step is to put cooperatives on the streets, then to generate an accompanying model that scales and then generate a business model that provides feedback and makes it sustainable over time. (Member 2 of FACTTIC and of the team of CoopCycle in Argentina, September 2021)

Another big challenge comes with this new perspective, since time, resources, and new capacities surpassing FACTTIC's are necessary to deploy local socio-economic circuits. Here, the State seems to be a key ally together with the rest of the actors encompassing the networks already created.

The background consists of several overlapping, irregularly shaped regions of color. A large yellow shape is in the top-left and top-right. A purple shape is in the top-center. A large orange shape covers the bottom-center and bottom-right. A blue shape is in the bottom-right corner. The boundaries between these shapes are jagged and irregular.

5.

CONCLUSIONS

5. CONCLUSIONS

Platform cooperativism is an emerging movement that represents the hope and renewed possibility of deepening structures, and practices of social empowerment in our societies, thanks to the benefits of information technology, and the Internet. The major challenges of platform co-ops are concerning growth, replicability, and scale. In Argentina, this movement comprises incipient experiences among which, the local implementation of CoopCycle stands out as a platform co-op that originated in France, Europe. This report analyzed the positive factors, challenges, and limitations of the local implementation of CoopCycle in Argentina, and, thus, the feasibility for this platform to scale and enlarge spaces of social empowerment beyond the Global North.

A set of eight main factors were identified with respect to the local implementation of CoopCycle. Resources at the starting point “inherited” from the European experience were crucial, with the availability of an open-source software serving as the central promotional factor. Three contextual conditions were outlined as key elements: First, the cooperative legal framework, which does not appear to be a barrier. Second, the cooperative movement, which, due to its magnitude and density, could embrace the nascent platform co-ops. Third, a highly urbanized country with bike infrastructure in the main cities, where courier co-ops could grow. However, these contextual conditions also pose challenges and limitations: members of worker co-ops in Argentina have access to weaker social security than European co-op workers, and urbanization processes in Latin America have been grounded in broader structural inequalities that generate a lack of services, and dispersion of population in the suburbs of the main cities. Moreover, sometimes, motorbikes remain the best option for couriers due to cost-related and cultural issues.

Organizational resources provided by the promoter of the local implementation are also fundamental. CoopCycle represents a strategic project within FACTTIC, a federation of tech worker co-ops with almost ten years of expertise in inter-cooperative and collaborative work. In addition to the key role of FACTTIC, the State has been a central player in the process, given that it has provided the two main grants funding the local implementation so far. Nevertheless, state grants generate workload in fund-seeking, and book-keeping that represents a challenge for the localization team, given the initial stages of the process.

Participating in, and creating networks mostly with other actors from the social and solidarity sector strengthens the local process. Throughout these networks,

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economic and political resources circulate, which in turn, are providing possibilities to scale, diversify knowledge, and offer different types of assistance. Nonetheless, further links could be built with other experiences related to platform co-ops in the country. Finally, the co-ops breeding co-ops pathway to incubate and accompany courier cooperatives seems to enhance social empowerment in comparison with state incubation models. Collective learning and reflection from parts of the local team have generated re-framings, and re-elaborations of strategies. Thus, the worker co-ops incubation process is starting to become a socio-economic circuit incubation process. In other words, co-ops are breeding territories to ensure cared environments for courier collectives.

These sets of factors do not outline a handbook on how to succeed in the implementation of a platform co-op in Argentina. On the contrary, they offer some lessons concerning the feasibility, and social empowering potential of platform cooperativism, from which it is possible to exchange insights with other experiences in different contexts. In this regard, I would like to highlight three points. First, as observed in previous research (Rebón & Kasparian, 2020), the centrality of the state in interstitial strategies of social change. The Argentinian—and also Mexican—experience of CoopCycle exposes the states as potentially key allies for creating and deepening spaces of social empowerment. Moreover, this support can help enlarge these spaces beyond national borders. The public financing granted to the Argentinian process illustrates this since it had an overall impact on CoopCycle, when they enabled the incorporation of a developer within the international team.

Second, despite the fact that bottom-up strategies can be more effective at cumulatively eroding capitalism when there are supporting state measures, these are unlikely to occur without adequate social power. In previous years, the Argentinian experience of state-incubated cooperatives showed that when state power subordinates social power, these experiences can be weakened (Kasparian, 2022). On the contrary, the analyzed case presents several vectors of social power that positively impact the local implementation as well as CoopCycle as a whole: open-source activism, a cooperative federation, an incubation, and an accompanying model where co-ops breed other co-ops. In sum, social power and state power can complement to boost social change on the whole.

Third, feasibility conditions cannot be analyzed by exclusively considering local dimensions. The transnational perspective prevails when analyzing the feasibility and consolidation of platform co-ops, since different scales must be considered

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in the scrutiny of the positive factors. Analyses need to take a viewpoint that links local and national factors as well as variables that transcend those territories. For instance, addressing the starting point of the local case urged for a transnational lens in order to grasp the relevance of the open-code software. The same happened when analyzing the implications of the local process in the socio-economic sustainability of CoopCycle on the whole: taking into account the importance of the local developer joining the international team called for this perspective.

With this in consideration, what does the Argentinian implementation allow us to learn about CoopCycle as a whole, and its pathway towards scale? The scaling process has the potential to deepen social empowerment experiences, and incorporation of the Internet enables communication, coordination, and peer-to-peer collaboration. At the same time, paradigmatic experiences of cooperativism show that scaling poses risks from a political, cooperative, and emancipatory point of view. It may be inversely proportional to democratic processes and participation, and local identities may be difficult to maintain during scaling. Consequently, I argue that CoopCycle's extended federated strategy to grow seems to delineate a transnational, diverse, inter-cooperative, and solidaristic platform.

Regarding software development and collaborative work: which was first considered solely as a software—within the regional federation—for worker collectives in Europe, the open-source code triggered its implementation in Argentina and other countries in the region. This solidaristic disposition from CoopCycle founders generated exchanges, inter-cooperation, and collaborations that shaped an extended federated strategy with the recent launch of CoopCycle Latinoamérica joining the ecosystem of CoopCycle.

Besides future challenges that this extended circulation of CoopCycle will surely pose, collaborative work so far has positively impacted the platform co-op. The development of cash payment in Mexico represents a solution to a pressing issue in Latin America. Not only that, but this feature, typically formulated for Latin American processes, could unfold a reflection about the Global South that is also present in Europe. The incorporation of a developer from FACTTIC is a major benefit for the platform. This collectivization of the developing work could generate greater documentation of processes and thus, increased possibilities to share the software and the know-how. Enlarging the team could also enable CoopCycle to reflect on and advance into an unexplored field: data collecting and analyzing.

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Regarding sustainability, the approval of the “Transportation Transition Proposal Plan” for Argentinian localization reframes the environmental agenda for the overall process, since environmental sustainability adopts multiple definitions and pathways in different contexts. Moreover, the transitional model suggested by FACTTIC could allow CoopCycle to be implemented in further latitudes.

This extended federated strategy to grow poses new challenges and opportunities regarding the interactions between the two hemispheres. More spaces for exchange, peer-to-peer learning, and collaboration are needed. Governance models will probably have to be reformulated to organically embrace CoopCycle Latinoamérica. The horizon of a transnational, diverse, inter-cooperative, and solidaristic platform will likely guide this pathway.



ENDNOTES

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1. In December 2015 Mauricio Macri, the leader of a center-right coalition, assumed the Presidency of Argentina.
2. These can be categorized according to the economic sector: a) design, translation, website creation, programming services, among others (Upwork, Freelancer, Workana); b) maintenance, repair, cleaning, and personal care services (IguanaFix, Home Solution, Mi Gran Taller, Zolvers, DogHero, and GuauSurfing); c) accommodation and tourism (Airbnb and HomeAway); d) passenger transportation (Uber and Cabify); e) delivery services (Rappi, Glovo, PedidosYa, Uber Eats, Ando, and Rapiboy); f) retail trade (MercadoLibre, OLX, and LetGo) (López Mourelo, 2020: 20).
3. For information about “Rodando Juntas”, the pilot project for implementing CoopCycle in Mexico, see Barrera-Flores, A.L., Cerdio-Vázquez, J.H., Guevara-Meza, A., Martínez-Louvier, J.M., Osorio-Torres, C., Rodríguez-Reyes, H.T., Viorneri-Camacho, I.J., Zepeda-Medina, Y. (2021).
4. I wish to thank Trebor Scholz, Aman Bardia, and my colleagues, the research fellows of the Institute for the Cooperative Digital Economy (ICDE) at The New School for the discussions and exchanges on topics analyzed in this report. I am especially grateful to Cecilia Muñoz Cancela, Véra Vidal, Shaked Spier, Agustina Súnico, Diego Fernández Peychaux, and Danilo Lujambio for commenting on early drafts and ideas of this report. I am also thankful to Pablo Vannini, Hernán Gigena, Nicolas Dimarco, Jesica Lacquaniti, Leandro Monk, Juan Ignacio Torres, Carlos Cuoco, José Fantasía, and Lucas Ferraro for their generosity and invaluable insights. Finally, an acknowledgment to the institutions that made this research possible: the Institute for the Cooperative Digital Economy at The New School, the Centro Cultural de la Cooperación (Cultural Center of Cooperation), the Instituto de Investigaciones Gino Germani (Gino Germani Research Institute) at the University of Buenos Aires, and the National Scientific and Technical Research Council of Argentina (CONICET).
5. These are socio-productive units managed by their workers, which originate from the conversion of capitalist companies. At present, there are 431 recuperated enterprises in Argentina (INAES, 2021). Beyond their differences, they share three remarkable aspects. First, they involve a critical situation of previous capitalist companies, broadly marked by generalized dismissals and non-payment of wages. Second, they represent processes of collective

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resistance by workers. These processes acquire different intensities, being the take or occupation of enterprises the most emblematic form of struggle. Finally, as a result of resistance processes, there occurs an organizational conversion of companies. In practically all the cases, new enterprises adopt the legal status of a worker cooperative.

6. Slack is a communication platform that offers many IRC-style features: channels organized by topic, private groups, and direct messaging. Content (files, conversations, and people) is all searchable within Slack.
7. GitHub is a provider of Internet hosting for software development and version control using Git. It provides access control and several collaboration features such as bug tracking, feature requests, task management, continuous integration, and wikis for every project. It is commonly used to host open-source projects.
8. OpenStreetMap is a collaborative project to create a free editable geographic database.
9. Loomio is a decision-making software and web service designed to assist groups with collaborative, consensus-focused decision-making processes. It is a free software web application, where users can initiate discussions and put up proposals.
10. By the time I closed this report, a Uruguayan cooperative federation was interested in the implementation of CoopCycle in Uruguay and had already held several meetings and exchanges with the Argentinian team.
11. In Chile there are four courier cooperatives interested in joining CoopCycle.
12. In Mexico seven courier collectives already use CoopCycle as pilot projects.
13. For more information, see Shaked Spier (2022). His report analyzes the ethics and values of two cooperatively owned digital platforms, including CoopCycle.



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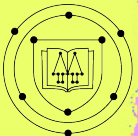
Member 2 of FACTTIC and of the team of CoopCycle in Argentina, September 2021.

Member 3 of FACTTIC and of the team of CoopCycle in Argentina, September 2021.

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