

## ***Agricultural cooperatives and the challenge of social management: a study in the south/southwest region of Minas Gerais, Brazil***

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### **Abstract**

It is supposed that cooperative organizations can and should be relevant collective social actors for development. Nevertheless, are organizations submerged in a competitive economic system and therefore should act to survive, considering the rules imposed by the system. The aim of this paper is to analyze how agricultural cooperatives of the south/southwest region of Minas Gerais, Brazil, contribute to local development. The seventh cooperative principle was considered concern for the community, focusing on its relation with the social management of cooperatives. Results show weaknesses in articulating social management and poor accomplishment of the seventh cooperative principle.

**Keywords:** Agriculture. Cooperatives. Social management. Community development; Seventh Cooperative Principle.

### **Resumo**

*Supõe-se que as cooperativas podem e devem ser atores relevantes para o desenvolvimento. No entanto, são organizações imersas em um sistema econômico competitivo e, portanto, devem agir para sobreviver, levando em conta as regras impostas pelo sistema. O objetivo deste artigo é analisar como as cooperativas agropecuárias da região sul/sudeste de Minas Gerais contribuem para o desenvolvimento local. Considerou-se o sétimo princípio cooperativo, a preocupação com a comunidade, focando em sua relação com a gestão social das cooperativas. Os resultados mostram fragilidades na articulação da gestão social e a má realização deste princípio.*

**Palavras-chave:** Agricultura. Cooperativas. Gestão social. Desenvolvimento comunitário. Sétimo princípio cooperativo.

## **1 Introduction**

This work aimed to identify the activities that agricultural cooperatives carry out with regard to social management as well as the activities they perform for the community. The purpose of this study was to verify how is the organization of the cooperatives alongside with other local entities, such as the relation among cooperative members, cooperative and

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community. There are as well considerations about social projects and a self-assessment by cooperatives about their contribution to local development.

Cooperativism is based on the union of people and not on capital, on which the common entrepreneurship is focused on the needs of the group and not on profit, seeking a joint prosperity around the cooperative values that would lead to an effective balanced success. These values are: mutual aid, self - responsibility, solidarity, equity, equality and democracy, which in practice must follow the guiding principles of the seven cooperative principles: 1. Free and voluntary adhesion, 2. Democratic and free management, 3. Economic participation of members, 4. Autonomy and independence, 5. Education, training and information, 6. Intercooperation, and 7. Interest in the community (ACI, 2018).

The concern with local development is explicit in the seventh cooperative principle: Interest in the community, which clarifies that special policies must be approved by cooperative members with the fundamental objective of contributing to the sustainable development of their respective communities being also agents of social change (MILAGRES; SOUSA, 2016).

Thus, the discussion developed in this paper is based on the idea that the development to be promoted by cooperatives in the community would be related to compliance with the seventh principle, and that its success depends on the freedom of actions and decisions that people have to exercise its role as an agent of economic, social and political change.

It is known that Cooperative organizations are immersed in a modern economic system and for this, they must act as companies that must survive by the rules imposed by this system. According to Pozzobon, Zylbersztajn and Bijman (2012) the growth of cooperative structures is followed by an increase in the complexity of its management. In other words, the professionalization of these organizations has been a major challenge for all cooperatives since they are forced to evolve, which is not different from other companies, especially with regard to their activities, technological interface, economic and financial management, the complexity of the organizational structure, as well as concerning relations amongst people and institutions (VALADARES, 2005).

According to Amodeo (2006) and Sousa *et al.* (2017a), there is an aspect that has not yet been developed with regard to the specificities that these organizations present since the

cooperatives differ from a non-cooperative company, since they act simultaneously as companies and associations.

In the study by Valadares (2005), with regard to activities, it can be said that cooperatives are migrating from a defensive behavior, characteristic of the 1970s and 1980s, to a more aggressive performance in the final markets, due to the high levels of competitiveness demanded by the new markets. It is therefore perceived that there is a need for the professionalization of management in the modern world to take place in cooperatives. Hence, they would play their role as competitive companies in the market and guarantee their future survival and so of their associates, for this, it is important that the cooperatives do not leave aside the specificities that they have.

It should be emphasized that due to the existence of effective and efficient business management is perhaps not the only attribute to be followed in order to achieve the success of the cooperative organization. Aspects such as the relations between the cooperative and its members become a crucial factor for the strategic management, since they cannot only contribute to the distribution of benefits to the cooperative, but also make them aware of the importance of investing in the growth of the cooperative. The membership's fidelity is crucial to make them more active and committed to the decisions to be taken by the cooperative, strengthens them not only from a social point of view, but also from a business approach (SOUSA *et al.*, 2014).

Cooperative societies, in order to obtain committed members to their organization, should invest in their training and qualification, as well as in promoting the cooperative values of the community to which they belong. That is, investing in their effective participation, aiming to have them trained, strengthen the organization, and thus have access to the market, policies and other local resources (SOUSA *et al.*, 2017b; Pires, 2018).

According to Amodeo (2006), this approach is based on the idea that in cooperatives, besides of focus on economic management, it becomes necessary to deepen the importance of social management, understood here as the management of the relation with its members. Therefore, not only professional business management of the highest quality is required, but also social management, through cooperative education, efficient intra-company communication systems and associates, and an internal management of power which enables

joint learning (FERREIRA, SOUSA; AMODEO, 2018). Consequently, the company must learn to engender value from its members associated characteristics, as well as the profile of the cooperative association obtains from the company profile the economic advantages that participation in the markets makes possible (AMODEO, 2006; BIALOSKORKI NETO, 2016).

Aiming to turn cooperatives into strong and promising competitors in markets, participation should also be prioritized and the role played by cooperative representative bodies should contribute to strategic management and a balance between corporate management and social management should be promoted (SOUSA *et al.*, 2015).

Cooperative education, organization of membership, improvement in the information channels between management and associates are some of the necessary mechanisms capable of allowing cooperatives to have a better quality management in their services and/or products. A more qualified management (transparent, participatory and democratic) guarantees the survival of the cooperative organization. According to Schneider (2006), to encourage the participation of partners, it is recommended to foster the spirit of work team and community through joint cultural, educational and charitable promotions, where the women of the members and young people have significant space in manifestation. Associates must therefore participate in centralization decisions in a flow that goes from the bottom up to the top down management of the organization.

For Albuquerque (2015), the role of the cooperative organization is to mediate processes, which are characterized by a network of relations demanding a new approach to the organization of training. The new approach has to be built from a social practice that inserts the associate and the cooperative in his community. This insertion of the cooperative organization into the local community can be applied through the seventh cooperative principle, Interest by the Community.

According to the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA), the seventh cooperative principle states that cooperatives are organizations that exist in the first instance for the benefit of their members. Because of this strong association with their members, often, in the same geographical space, they show that cooperatives are closely linked to their communities. Thus, according to the principles, these organizations would have the special responsibility to ensure the continuity of the development of their community in economic, social and cultural

aspects. Another requirement of ICA's documents on cooperative principles is the obligation to work constantly for the environmental protection of its community. In this way, it is up to the members of the cooperative society to decide how much and in what form a cooperative should contribute to their community (ACI, 2018).

Thus, it can be seen that cooperatives could, as a community organization, be an important institution in promoting the social participation of those involved in the community in order to conduct their actions and decisions and promote local development, either by making their members economically viable or articulating their interests towards political institutions (LONDEIRO; BIALOSKORSKI NETO, 2016). They could also, through the participation of their associates, be promoters of community action and conduct projects/programs for the community in which they are inserted, since their owner-users would be both agents and beneficiaries of them. By enabling its members to participate, it would simultaneously promote the formation of citizens capable of participating in the management of public policies. Likewise, by the fact that cooperatives are organizations with a presence in the community, they could become privileged collective actors, with a leading role in the development process (MILAGRES; SOUSA, 2016).

Local development involves people and the vocations of the community, their relevant role is that community action does not have an owner, but belongs to everyone. A fact that resembles it with the main characteristic of cooperatives being a collectively owned and democratically managed enterprise, in them is prevailing free admission, where the "we" prevails in a participatory way in the construction of the common good. The fact of being a social actor in the community shares social responsibilities, that is, each member of the collective feels stronger, more important and active in the construction of a public good. It also offers physical, mental and all claim that the material or financial effort sets the real community action, which, in turn, has a strong relation with cooperative organizations, due to the seventh principle also seen here. The concern with the community is what will sustain the cooperative in the future and will permanently need to command its different social, political, cultural and economic systems.

For all this, it is necessary to sensitize managers of cooperatives of the influence and importance of the integration of the associate to the cooperative (MACEDO *et al.*, 2017). It is

also necessary to make clear that this work usually shows results in the medium and long term and that cannot always be evaluated quantitatively, but qualitatively (VALADARES, 2005). Therefore, it is up to the cooperative to adopt the vision of development in economic and social management, otherwise the choices and opportunities of those who would believe in the cooperative organization as a mechanism of participation and democratic control would be limited.

## 2 Methodology

The present study of the region is predominantly agricultural and comes from coffee cooperatives a large part of this contribution. Minas Gerais produces 56.3% of Brazilian coffee. The agricultural cooperatives of this state accounted for 55.9% of this total in 2016 (OCEMG, 2017).

The choice of this region is also due to be one of the three regions of the state of Minas Gerais with the largest number of cooperatives registered and in compliance with the Syndicate and Organization of Cooperatives of the State of Minas Gerais (OCEMG) system (OCEMG, 2017).

It is important to point out that a similar study was carried out previously in the area of *Zona da Mata of Minas Gerais* and it was noticed the difficulty of cooperative organizations to comply in practice with what the seventh principle preaches, since they do little in relation to their social management (MILAGRES *et al.*, 2008). Nevertheless, experiences in other regions could show the structures of action different from the reality found in the region.

According to the Yearbook of *Cooperativismo Mineiro* (2017), the state of Minas Gerais represents 9,5% of the total number of cooperatives registered in the Organization of Brazilian Cooperatives (OCB), a formal entity of cooperatives according to Law N<sup>o</sup>. 5764/71, which regulates these cooperatives. The agricultural sector is among the most representative in the state of Minas Gerais, with 203 cooperatives, 141.616 associate members and 14.980 employees (OCEMG, 2017).

The region of the South//southwest of Minas Gerais counts with a population of 38 agricultural cooperatives that will be objects of study of this work. In this sense, a form with

open and closed questions was sent by email to all affiliated to OCEMG, but only 11 returned duly filled, which corresponded to a percentage of 28.9% of the total number of agricultural cooperatives in the region. The data were collected from the use of self-administered questionnaires, which, according to May (2011), are presented as a cheaper technique of data collection to cover a wide geographical area and is a channel for the anonymous expression of rooted points of view.

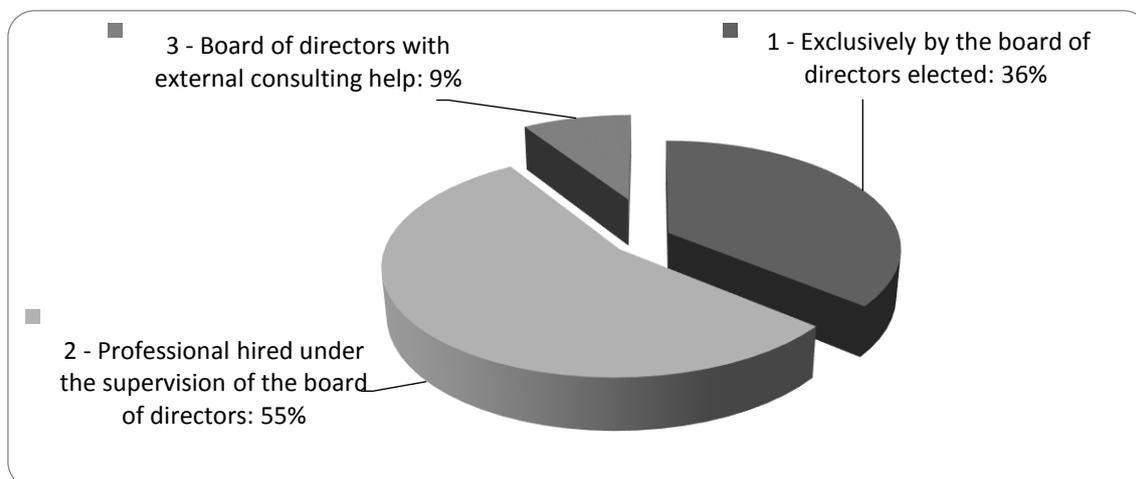
Finally, the data were analyzed with the support of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), statistical software for the social sciences.

### **3 Results**

Cooperatives are classified by Organization of Brazilian Cooperatives into 13 branches that differentiate them according to economic activity. In order to give compliance of treatment to the issues of interest, to present proposals and claims related to structural or conjunctural problems, to contribute to promote the integration of the branches and the achievement of common goals for the development of cooperativism. The branches are Agricultural, Consumer, Credit, Educational, Special, Housing, Infrastructure, Mineral, Production, Health, Labor, Tourism and Transportation. In the case of this study, we will consider only the 28.9% of the cooperatives belonging to the agricultural sector of Minas Gerais that answered the questionnaire sent. Other cooperatives from other sectors also answered the questionnaire, although this work only presents the results of the research with the agricultural cooperatives.

A correct cooperative business management is fundamental to guide the organization's planning, strategies, allocate and generate resources, and enable the proposed economic and social objectives to be achieved. In this sense, an attempt was made to identify how the administrative management of agricultural cooperatives in the region studied was characterized (Figure 1).

**Figure 1 - Characterization of the administrative management of agricultural cooperatives in the South/Southwest of Minas Gerais**

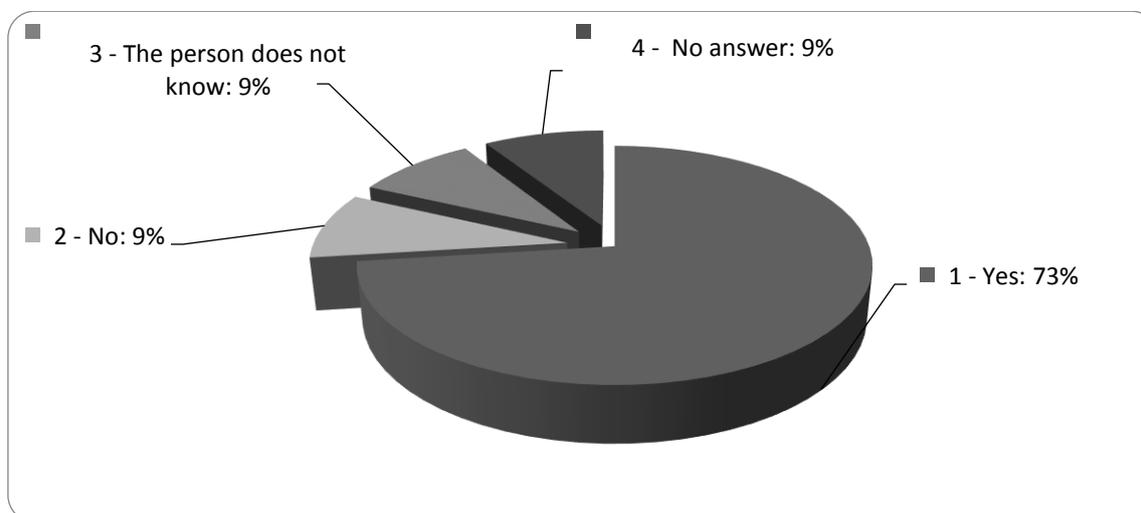


Source: Research data.

It is observed, therefore, that agricultural cooperatives are adopting the professionalization management model as a way to assist in decision-making and to improve business management and cooperative competitiveness. Hired professionals under the supervision of the board of directors manage most of them. This professionalization must be viewed with care by the cooperative members, since there is a danger that the manager's decisions will pre-empt, deferring the participation and preferred strategic options of the cooperative, that is, generating a low participation and involvement of the associated in the cooperative. The importance of having a social management good work (participation and cooperative education).

The graph above shows that the financial and economic issues (members' payment default) were the main problems mentioned in the survey; followed by the information system and the involvement of members. Some cooperatives have shown that business issues relate to social issues and not that they should be seen separately, they interconnect forming the two sides of cooperative (business and social) management. This can also be seen in figure 2 about the participation and economic outcomes.

**Figure 2 - Some relations between the social participation of the cooperative and the results obtained by the agricultural cooperatives in the South/Southwest of Minas Gerais is perceived**



Source: Research Data.

Although a large portion fails to visualize the social problems that surround the cooperative organization (36.36%), those who perceive it mention the involvement of the members (27.7%) as the main one in terms of entrepreneurship, concerning customer loyalty. It is therefore clear that it is from a joint between business and social management would result in an authentic cooperative management, turning it into a more efficient system, socially and economically as well as a greater impact would be obtained in the community.

The reason for being a cooperative is its associate since the cooperative is to meet the needs of the owners and users of its services. This should play a key role in the cooperative, since the member is responsible for making the decisions and still enjoy the benefits. The membership of the cooperative must be aware of its rights and duties in order to be able to relate positively to the cooperative organization. According to the data obtained in the agricultural cooperatives of the South/Southwest of Minas Gerais, 81.8% stated that the cooperative members know about the role they play within the organization. However, since the low participation of cooperative members is one of the most common problems in Brazilian cooperativism, it was also sought to investigate whether there is any work of Organization of Membership. It is not important whether it is done through committees, nucleus, local commissions or other means of instigating the members to participate, to train,

to discuss and to contribute to the decision-making and, if it does not exist, what would be the reasons for the absence of such work.

The work of Organization of Membership can be considered as an important element for the educational, political, human resources aspects and crucial in providing a way to apply cooperative principles in the corporate management of these organizations. However, as in this case, almost all Brazilian Organization of Membership known experiences are linked to agrarian cooperativism. Thus, in the South/ Southwest of Minas Gerais, 36.4% of the cooperative members answered affirmatively. Among the most worked themes are: participation and loyalty of the cooperative (18.2%) and cooperativism (9.1%).

Organizations that do not carry out an Organization of Membership work (45.5%), and those that did not know how to respond (18.2%) are mentioned as the main reasons for not having a specific work with the membership. Consequently, it shows the existence of projects in the implementation phase; others justify the small number of cooperatives in the organization when, in their opinion, the OM would demand a greater number; and there are those showing no engagement, justifying that there is no need for such work.

Another result points shows the sad reality of agrarian cooperativism in the South/Southwest of Minas Gerais, that is, the weakening of the membership due to the lack of engagement in cooperative education activities. This analysis can be proven through the sum of the high number of cooperative members that did not respond and those that do not perform any cooperative education activity, that is, 72.7%. A good work of cooperative education reflects in the knowledge of the organization by its members, by the local community and through the verified data. It is perceived that there can be a deficit in relation to the cooperatives of the region. For those that do carry out activities, it is noticed that these are individual actions or activities developed by other institutions, not appearing in the responses to a training process participation offered by the cooperative.

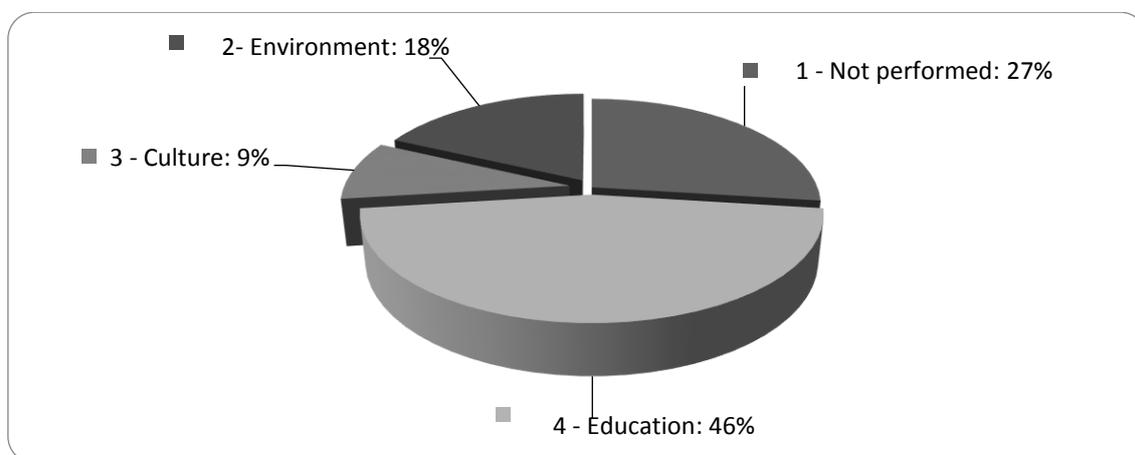
A relevant point in this work concerns the cooperative members' relation with the local community. It plays an important role in the actions of the cooperative: to promote the economic and social well-being of the cooperative, to guide them towards community participation and to contribute to an improvement in the quality of life of the population. Cooperatives through their membership should interfere in the community dimension of

development, that is, participate in other bodies that contribute to the development of the municipality, such as local councils and/or committees or any other public policy management body, to carry out actions, individually or in partnerships, to promote local sustainable development.

Other collective institutions could participate and contribute to local development within cooperative organizations. Local development is a participatory process that involves people and entities in a joint action on projects aimed at improving the living conditions of the community, so it is necessary not only to know how to articulate forces, but also to promote the corresponding process. Partnership and working together with these entities is essential and can give great support to the community. Thus, when asked about which instances collaborated locally with other organizations, 9.1% mentioned rural tourism and another 60% related to local government, with 20% specifying the Secretary of Agriculture, another 20% mentioned the Municipal Councils for Sustainable Rural Development and the others did not elaborate.

Besides the relation with other institutions, it was also analyzed whether these organizations carry out some kind of social project with the community where they are located and the area of their projects (Figure 3). Projects turned to education are the most representative, with 46% of the cooperatives, followed by Environment with 18% and culture with 9% only.

**Figure 3 - Area of action of the social projects developed by the agricultural cooperatives of the South/Southwest of Minas Gerais**



Source: Research data.

It was also proposed to cooperatives consulted to assess their contribution to the community in which they are inserted, assigning a grade of 1 (low participation in the community) to 5 (high participation in the community) independent of the social projects that they performed in the local community. The notes can be seen in the following chart:

Although the self-evaluation grades concerning the contribution of cooperatives to the community are considered high (45% note 4), this is not consistent with the results of other questions that asked about the recognition of the organization by its members and by the local community. That is, work involving social management aspects would be important for the culture of cooperation to spread among its members and the local population. However, 45.5% stated that the local population would not be able to differentiate the cooperative's work from a non-cooperative organization with equivalent economic functions.

Still, 81.8% of the cooperatives stated that the members could perceive the difference, justifying that 36.4% perceived by the benefits. On the other hand, 18.2% indicated the events about cooperativism as the reason for knowing the difference. Another 18.2% stated that members should know, because they had received a booklet with such information when admitted in the cooperative and eventually, 9.1% declared that they know how to distinguish them because they participated in its creation.

#### **4 Discussion**

The pressure to focus on economic management is strong, promoting a dichotomy where social and business are presented as opposites. Searching to improve the competitiveness of cooperative organizations in the market, these organizations have often sought to become similar to companies. Thus, it seems that there is a belief that these organizations should be less cooperative in order to become more competitive in the market, and that the effort to facilitate the relationship between members and local community should be left aside (FERREIRA, SOUSA; COSTA, 2018).

The South/Southwest of Minas Gerais, besides being one of the most well-developed regions of the state, has large cooperatives that contribute economically to their members. However, when analyzing the education processes that these organizations undertake, they prove to be inadequate and weakly articulated. Directly or indirectly, themes like financial and economic issues also relate to the participation of the cooperative members, since the greater the participation, the greater the control of the cooperative on the management, the less opportunism, the greater commitment of the members (AMODEO, 2006).

According to the study by Valadares (2005), cooperatives are migrating from a defensive behaviour to a more aggressive approach because of the high levels of competitiveness required by new markets. It is clear, therefore, that in the modern world there is a necessity for the professionalization of management in cooperatives, so that they may perform their role as competitive organizations and guarantee their survival and their members' survival. However, for this, it is important that cooperatives not forget their basic features.

In addition, there is a low participation of cooperatives articulating their work with other organizations operating in the municipality, such as local committees and boards, among others. This would be a way to achieve effective participation and also contribute to local development decisions and management of the municipality.

It can be seen that fostering participation or exercising social management is a preponderant factor that can begin with the loyalty of the members, calling them to participating continuously in the cooperative, contributing both economically and socially. It is through an effective, conscious and responsible participation of all members that the

success of the socioeconomic goals of the cooperative entrepreneurship will be achieved (Valadares, 2005).

One can also conclude that the role of cooperatives in local development as mentioned in the seventh principle was not always prioritized and a cooperative education with members would be a way to achieve their commitment to the cooperative.

Cooperatives should invest in training and human development to achieve commitment from members towards the organization, as well as promote cooperative values in the community in which they belong. In other words, cooperatives should invest in effective participation so that members are empowered, thereby strengthening the organization to access the market, policies and other local resources.

Social management can be feasible through cooperative education work. Amodeo (2006) and Ferreira, Sousa e Amodeo (2018) postulate that cooperative education can be an alternative solution that allows cooperatives to overcome the challenge of being competitive, being parallel protagonists of development.

Discussions about cooperatives, community and cooperative education are based on the idea that the development promoted by cooperatives should be related to the seventh principle, and that a cooperative's success depends on the freedom of action and decisions of its members as they act as agents of economic, social and political change.

The results presented in this study indicate that work to undertake a critical analysis of the role of education on management of cooperatives is required. It is also important to emphasize the contribution of an instrument that can strengthen the cooperative movement as a whole and also the development of the community.

## **5 Conclusions**

The South/Southwest region of Minas Gerais, besides being one of the most developed regions of the state, it has large cooperatives that contribute economically to its members, however, this study showed that the main business problems mentioned by these organizations relate to social issues. The low level of responses to a survey concerning social management, participation and cooperative education is, in itself, an indicator of an

evaluative tendency. The social participation of the cooperative members is seen as an indicator that positively influences the economic life of the cooperative, although they manifest problems in the way of making this participation viable. Given these circumstances, it was noticed in the cooperatives the challenge of articulating their social activities.

There is a weak participation of cooperatives articulating their work with other collective institutions operating in the municipality, such as local commissions, councils, among others. Although this work is not representative of the universe of cooperative organizations in general, it is worth mentioning that their work with other institutions would be a way to make effective participatory management possible, as well as contributing to local decisions and the development of the municipality. Corroborating this importance, however, would require a more detailed and long-term study concerning the main role of these institutions on social relations.

Accordingly, cooperative activities in local development - mentioned in the seventh principle - were not always prioritized and that cooperative education among members of the social community would be a way to obtain cooperative members committed to their organization. As aforementioned, investing in training and membership qualification would also be a way of promoting cooperative values in the community. Although it is convenient to carry out a critical analysis about the role of cooperativist education in the management of these cooperatives, it was noticed that this should not be understood as a panacea, but to emphasize its importance as an instrument for constructing and strengthening cooperativism.

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