

Invitation

Neuchâtel, 12 November 2024

Dear Professors, Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are pleased to invite you to the :

Cooperatives towards sustainability: from of cooperation to joint action

which will be held at the University of Neuchâtel in Switzerland on

6 and 7 March 2025

Issues

Cooperative identity is regularly put forward by research into cooperative organisations as a means of serving the interests of cooperators in the long term while helping to align these interests with objectives of social and environmental justice. For its part, sustainability is expressed at public authority level by translating the United Nations' sustainable development objectives into *ad hoc* strategies or in relation to environmental issues.

On 19 June 2024, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed 2025 as the International Year of Cooperatives, inviting States and stakeholders to promote the contribution of cooperatives to social and economic development.

The aim of the conference being held on 6 and 7 March 2025 is to highlight the relationship and points of contact between sustainability and cooperatives, between the general and the particular, from a legal and interdisciplinary perspective.

Research questions

The research questions will be addressed under three main headings: cooperative values, democracy within cooperatives, and the commons and sustainability, each of which will be the subject of a half-day discussion. The aim of these three themes is to provide a broad framework for reflection from an interdisciplinary perspective, in order to discuss the proposed questions and even propose new ones.



First axis. Cooperative values: a link between cooperative law and sustainability?

Against a backdrop of global ecological crisis, the issues surrounding housing are closely linked to the rational use of natural resources. According to the Federal Council's latest report, "Environment Switzerland 2022", the housing sector accounts for a quarter of Switzerland's environmental impact. Cooperative values, as espoused by the International Cooperative Alliance (Mills & Davis, 2013), are one way of combining respect for the planet's ecological limits with the promotion of social justice (Henrÿ, 2023).

Do these cooperative values have legal force in domestic law? Do they make it possible to establish a link between cooperative society law, the requirements of ecological sustainability and considerations of social justice? Can the "donut" theory (Raworth, 2017), which identifies a safe space within which humanity evolves in a sustainable manner, be applied to cooperative law? Are cooperatives in the wake of "strong sustainability" in connection with the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)? Is this expressed precisely by the values promoted by cooperatives or by public policies, for example on housing (Pattaroni/Marmy 2016)?

Second axis. Democracy within co-operatives: variations, trends, tensions.

Cooperatives are based on the principle of "one member, one vote". However, participation arrangements vary widely depending on the size, economic sector or type of cooperative (consumer, worker, producer or 'mixed') (Kaswan 2014; 2021; Pattaroni/Marmy 2016). Studies on the 'degeneration' and 'regeneration' of cooperatives show that their practices also evolve over time, even within the same cooperative. These changes may be due to external pressures, such as economic competition, or to internal dynamics, such as the emergence of informal hierarchies (Bretos et al. 2020).

Through this second theme, we seek to better understand the synchronic and diachronic variations of democratic arrangements and practices within cooperatives. We welcome all submissions, regardless of the type of cooperative or geographical region studied.

What democratic arrangements have been put in place by cooperatives? Do actual practices differ from the formal arrangements? What factors favour democratic organisation, what factors hinder it, and where do tensions arise? How can we explain the spatial and temporal variations in democratic arrangements and practices within co-operatives? How are democratic arrangements and practices (re-)negotiated within co-operatives?

Third theme. The land commons and the cooperative: Sustainability through or in spite of ownership?

The commons is defined as a collectively governed set of resources, with a governance structure that distributes rights among the participants in the commons (*commoners*), and aims to ensure the orderly exploitation of the resource, enabling it to be reproduced over the long term (Ostrom, 1990; Coriat, 2015). The theory of the commons resonates strongly with the models of cooperation set up around shared resources by a given community of users. In terms of land and housing management, the values underpinning cooperation and the way it works would make it possible to envisage new ways of *owning property*, while respecting the ecological limits of the resources in question and on the basis of collective decisions (Crétois, 2023).



Are co-operatives a laboratory for a new form of property, or for a renewal of property rights? What are the links between the land commons and housing co-operatives? Are co-op users the same as commoners? To what extent does collective use enable the pursuit of ecological sustainability? Is this use circumscribed by the inherent limits of the resources used?

Schedule and provisional programme

In order to answer these questions, the conference is divided into three academic workshops and a public round-table discussion.

The workshops on research questions will each include one or two presentations by specialists in the cooperative movement, economic regulation and innovative forms of ownership. Then, in response to a call for projects from the Conférence Universitaire de Suisse Occidentale (CUSO), doctoral students will present their research on a particular theme. There will be plenty of time for discussion.

Each workshop will take place over half a day, on Thursday mornings and afternoons, and on Friday mornings. Presentations will last 20 minutes and will be followed by 5 minutes of questions. There will then be time for group discussion. Presentations and discussions will take place in French and English.

A public round-table discussion will be held at the end of the day on Thursday to enable a wider audience to discover the emerging ideas mobilising cooperatives.

	Thursday 6 March	Friday 7 March
8h30	Coffee and croissants	
9am-9.15am	Welcome from the Dean	Coffee and croissants
9.15 a.m. to 12 p.m.	<i>Cooperative values: a link between cooperative law and sustainability?</i>	<i>Democracy in cooperatives: variations, trends, tensions</i>
12h-13h30	Meals	Official closing and meal
1.30 p.m. to 5 p.m.	<i>The commons and cooperatives: Sustainability through or in spite of ownership?</i>	Cooperative visits and free writing workshops
6.15pm - 8pm	<i>Emerging ideas involving cooperatives</i> Round table open to the public	
20h15	Meals	

Conference proceedings

The organising team hopes to produce a collective work containing the contributions of the speakers, which will be published in *open access* by the University of Neuchâtel following the conference.

Contributions may be written in French, English or German. Contributions may be legal, sociological or from other academic disciplines.

Practical organisation

The conference is organised with the financial support of the SNSF and CUSO. Participation in the conference is free of charge, subject to any costs incurred by late withdrawal. It includes



the publication of the book and meals. Accommodation can be requested from the organising team and will be provided on request, subject to budget availability.

Registration, deadlines and returns

Those interested in taking part are asked to submit a **300-word** project by **15 January 2025**, outlining the content of their planned contribution.

Candidates will be notified by 30 January 2025 at the latest. The deadline for written contributions, limited to **4,500 words**, is 15 April 2025. A book containing the participants' written contributions will be published in the spring of the International Year of Cooperatives 2025.

Target audience

The conference is aimed at doctoral students and researchers from various disciplines who are interested in cooperatives, ownership and sustainability. It is open to anyone interested in the cooperative phenomenon.

The round-table discussion at the end of the day on Thursday is aimed at a wider audience, including lawyers, cooperative members, members of public administrations and elected representatives.

Special invitations are extended to the following organisations: CUSO droit, *ius cooperativum*, ILO Cooperatives Section, International Cooperative Alliance, Idée Coopérative, ARMOUP, Cooperative Housing International, CoHabitat Network, Réseau interuniversitaire de l'économie sociale et solidaire and the "Collaborative Housing" group of the European Network for Housing Research.

Organisational team

Prof. Valérie Défago, Alice Dugerdil, Dimitri Paratte, as lawyers, Prof. Philip Balsiger, Victoria Becerril Nito, Dr Fabian Petutschnig, Dr Nicholas Pohl, as sociologists, Prof. Hugues Jeannerat, as an innovation economist from the Maison d'analyse des processus sociaux, University of Neuchâtel, as well as Prof. Jean Ruegg and Dr Anthony Boanada-Fuchs, as urban planners from the University of Lausanne.

Draft contributions and any other questions can be sent by email to: droit-sociologie.cooperatives@unine.ch.

We look forward to hearing about your plans and will be happy to provide you with any further information you may require.

Indicative bibliography

Bretos, I., Errasti, A., & Marcuello, C. (2020). Is There Life After Degeneration? The Organizational Life Cycle of Cooperatives Under a 'Grow-Or-Die' Dichotomy. *Annals of Public and Cooperative Economics*, 91(3), 435-458. <https://doi.org/10.1111/apce.12258>

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Kaswan, M. J. (2014). Developing democracy: Cooperatives and democratic theory. *International Journal of Urban Sustainable Development*, 6(2), 190-205.
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Mills, Cliff, and Will Davies. "Blueprint for a Co-operative Decade. ACI. Brussels, 2013.
Ostrom Elinor, *Governing the Commons, The evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*, Cambridge University Press, 1990.

Pattaroni, Luca, & Vanessa Marmy. "Housing cooperatives in the canton of Vaud".
Lausanne: Service des communes et du logement du canton de Vaud and the Laboratoire de Sociologie Urbaine de l'EPFL, October 2016.

Raworth Kate. "A Doughnut for the Anthropocene: Humanity's Compass in the 21st Century". *The Lancet Planetary Health* 1, n° 2 (May 2017): e48-49.

