

Cooperativist Dynamics in Post-Conflict Societies: Addressing the Rochdale Principles as a Local Framework for Peacebuilding Initiatives in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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Introduction

Bosnia and Herzegovina, a society marked by a tumultuous past, continues to face persistent challenges related to institutional and administrative issues [1]. This situation also reflects in a small-scale perspective when observed social cohesion and economic development aspects [2]. The ethnic conflict culminating in the Bosnian War (1992-1995) left deep scars, resulting in the fragmentation and segregation of its communities [3]. The war devastated infrastructure, destabilized the economy, and exacerbated ethnic tensions, creating an environment where reconciliation and sustainable development are issues harder to address [4]. Post-conflict societies like Bosnia and Herzegovina face significant hurdles in rebuilding social cohesion and trust, essential components for long-term peace and stability.

In this context, cooperatives - an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprise, emerge as a local agent that can offer a bottom-up approach in order to contribute to peacebuilding and social reconstruction. Usually remembered in moments of crisis, cooperatives are organized by their principles of equality, solidarity, and democracy [5]. Despite the challenges faced by cooperatives, whether through co-optation by the private market [6-8] or due to their state-oriented nature in countries that experienced the Soviet regime, cooperatives have demonstrated relevant assets in several cases around the world by contributing to economic development and social cohesion [9-11].

Regarding the specific contribution of cooperatives to peacebuilding, is neither obvious nor clear. For this reason, the research is based on the understanding that community cohesion fostered by cooperatives not only strengthens democracy but also serves as a pillar for peacebuilding, based on the central idea of "positive peace", as defined by Johan Galtung [12-14]. Galtung distinguishes between "negative peace" (the absence of conflict) and positive peace (the presence of social justice, equity, and cohesion). In this sense, cooperatives can play an important role in promoting positive peace by creating networks of support, mutual trust, and solidarity, which are fundamental for reconciliation and democratization in divided societies.

Notable examples include the cases of Rwanda and Colombia, where cooperatives have played crucial roles in post-conflict reconstruction, fostering mutual trust and social capital [15]. For that reason, an attention dedicated to the cooperatives in the post-conflict situation of Bosnia and Herzegovina can be interesting due to its ethnical context and its ongoing reconciliation efforts, providing an interesting case study for understanding the transformative capacity of cooperatives in similar scenarios.

Thus, the general objective of this article is to explore the role of cooperatives in fostering community bonds and promoting peacebuilding in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The research aims to analyze the potential of cooperatives in a post-conflict context. Drawing on institutional ethnographic research and conducted also within some cooperatives, will be possible to examine how these entities can contribute to democratization and reconciliation by creating spaces of encounter and cooperation among individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds. To achieve this objective, the structure of the paper begins with a historical overview of the conflict in Bosnia, emphasizing the vulnerabilities and challenges that emerged from the war. The following section presents and details the cooperative principles, highlighting their points of convergence with issues related to peacebuilding initiatives. Additionally, examples of achievement will be discussed, derived from both a literature review and data collected from reports and brief interviews with international organizations, primarily based in Sarajevo.

The methodology is then presented, employing a mixed-methods approach. This involves a content analysis of organizational reports, strategic plans, and project evaluations from different international organizations in order to identify patterns and trends. By examining the challenges in Bosnia and Herzegovina related to conflict, particularly through data collection and literature review, this study intends to identify key issues that need to be highlighted. Subsequently, the attributes derived from the Rochdale Principles are observed and discussed, and by cross-referencing these insights with the challenges mentioned, the research aims to answer the initial question, identifying the areas where cooperative experience has already experienced good results.

In this way, the article intends to contribute to the broader debate on nationalism, democratization, and peacebuilding in post-conflict settings, demonstrating the transformative potential of a local agents - like cooperatives - in fragmented societies. This study tries to shed light on grassroots initiatives that drive social change and reconciliation, positioning cooperatives as one component in the efforts to rebuild and sustain peace in post-conflict scenario.

Ethnic Conflict and Historical Context in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Bosnia and Herzegovina's history is marked by a complex ethnic landscape and a series of conflicts. The country's ethnic and religious diversity, composed of Bosniaks (many of whom are Muslim), Croats (predominantly Catholic), and Serbs (majority Orthodox), is the result of a long history of interactions and conflicts. Spanning the Ottoman period (15th-19th centuries) and the Austro-Hungarian era (late 19th-early 20th centuries), the region's history is marked by significant ethnic and religious diversity, shaped by centuries of interaction and exchange [16]. Years later, during the Socialist Yugoslavia era (1945-1992), Tito's regime sought to unify the diverse ethnic groups under a single Yugoslav identity, but underlying ethnic tensions remained [17-19]. The breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s and Bosnia and Herzegovina's subsequent declaration of independence led to a violent ethnic conflict in the region, marked by ethnic cleansing and genocide, particularly in the city of Srebrenica [20-21]. The conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina was deeply rooted in the ethnic tensions that had been simmering during the Socialist Yugoslav era. The death of Josip Broz Tito - who had managed these divisions through a sophisticated system of federalism and centralized control - led to the disintegration of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s. This breakup brought ethnic rivalries to the forefront, with Bosnia and Herzegovina, home to Bosniaks, Serbs, and Croats, becoming the epicenter of a violent struggle for territorial control and national identity [16].

Following Bosnia's declaration of independence in 1992, the Serb population, backed by neighboring Serbia, opposed the secession, igniting a brutal war. The conflict was marked by the Siege of Sarajevo, during which Serbian forces encircled the capital, subjecting it to continuous shelling and sniper fire for nearly four years. This siege not only illustrated the ethnic animosities driving the conflict but also revealed the difficulties faced by the international community in intervening effectively [22]. The war's most harrowing moment came with the Srebrenica massacre in July 1995. Over 8,000 Bosniak men and boys were systematically executed by Bosnian Serb forces in an atrocity that was later recognized as genocide. This event underscored the devastating impact of unchecked ethnic divisions and highlighted the dire consequences of the conflict [23]. The violence and atrocities had lasting effects on Bosnia's social and economic structures, leaving deep scars that continue to affect the country's post-war recovery and reconciliation efforts. The Dayton Accords, which formally ended the war, resulted in a fragile peace. The country was divided into two entities along ethnic lines, a solution necessary to stop the fighting but one that entrenched the very divisions that had fueled the conflict [24].

These ethnic divisions have had profound impacts not only institutionally, but also on the social and economic structures of Bosnia and Herzegovina [16]. The fragmentation of communities and institutions has hindered social cohesion and integration. Ethnic favoritism in employment and resource allocation has resulted in significant economic disparities. The complex political system established by the Dayton Agreement, designed to balance

power among ethnic groups, often leads to political gridlock, impeding economic and social development [25]. In this context, Bosnia and Herzegovina faces a myriad of challenges deeply rooted in its complex ethnic landscape and tumultuous history. The division of the country into ethnic entities, as mandated by the Dayton Agreement, has resulted in entrenched segregation, fragmenting communities and institutions and impeding social integration. This segregation not only perpetuates ethnic divisions but also impedes meaningful interaction among different groups [26].

In this context, we can identify four mainly significant, interrelated, challenges that arise as consequences of the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina

- The ethnic diversity within the country. This complex ethnic landscape continues to pose significant challenges to nation-building and democratization [23]
- fragmented political system, which often results in political gridlock. This fragmentation obstructs the effective implementation of reforms and stymies progress, hindering both governance and development efforts. The inefficiencies within the political structure challenge the country's ability to address critical economic and social issues [26]
- lack of trust, once that lingering animosities and the need to address historical grievances complicate the reconciliation process, posing obstacles to achieving lasting peace and social cohesion [27] and
- the long-term economic difficulties resulting from the war and subsequent instability leave Bosnia and Herzegovina with a weakened economy and damaged infrastructure. The slow pace of economic recovery underscores the need for effective strategies to rebuild and develop the country's economic foundations [28].

Given this multifaceted and complex scenario, it is worth considering different actors and alternatives to observe peacebuilding initiatives from another perspective. Cooperatives can be considered due to its democratic principles and development attributes, offering contributions across these challenges. Exploring the role of cooperatives in assisting and mitigating issues like these mentioned, presents an interdisciplinary opportunity to discuss its role in peacebuilding initiatives, especially regarding Bosnia and Herzegovina's persistent challenges.

The Interdisciplinarity between Cooperativism and Peacebuilding

Cooperatives are frequently recognized as a viable alternative during crises, whether they are economic, social, or environmental [29]. In addition to the traditionally studied, researched, and analyzed areas concerning cooperatives, McPherson and Immanuel, have investigated additional attributes of cooperatives that merit further exploration, especially their role in peacebuilding through democratic values and reconciliation efforts [30,31]. They can be considered pioneers in exploring this interdisciplinarity among cooperatives and peace processes, a perspective recently discussed by a report from Cooperatives Europe, which outlines this connection between cooperatives and peacebuilding efforts [15]. Despite this, a more thorough examination of their peacebuilding capacity is still needed and, consequently, a deeper analysis of this relationship remains essential.

In this same sense, statements, resolutions, and initiatives from the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) also highlight the role of cooperatives in addressing issues related to positive peace. The concept of positive peace, inaugurated by Galtung, understand a

form of peace that goes beyond the mere absence of conflict (what can be seen as a negative peace) [32]. In this sense, according to Galtung, positive peace involves the presence of conditions that contribute to a just and equitable society, including the resolution of underlying social injustices and structural inequalities. It encompasses the establishment of social systems that promote human rights, economic fairness, and inclusive participation, thus fostering a harmonious society where conflicts are resolved through constructive dialogue and systemic changes rather than through suppression or avoidance [33]. Most of these characteristics can be perceived and observed within the cooperative principles, reinforcing the reason why the ICA has incorporated the concept into some of its resolutions and declarations, while also supporting the main argument of this research.

Galtung's framework emphasizes that achieving positive peace requires addressing and transforming the root causes of conflict, such as poverty, discrimination, and lack of political representation. It envisions a society where structural violence is minimized, and individuals and communities are empowered to live in a state of positive well-being [33]. It is through these democratic aspects and social cohesion that Galtung's concept of positive peace is understood. Given that the recognized contributions of cooperatives are mainly rooted in these aspects - as outlined in the Rochdale Principles - Galtung's concept provides a pathway for exploring the interdisciplinary connections between cooperativism and peacebuilding capacities.

It is possible to find additional examples where the actions of cooperatives can be understood as contributing to democratic processes and social cohesion, and, in turn, supporting peacebuilding initiatives. McPherson, Paz, and Immanuel highlight some key characteristics that underscore this interdisciplinary relationship between cooperatives and peacebuilding, demonstrating how cooperatives can contribute effectively to peacebuilding initiatives: democratic principles, community engagement and conflict resolution, promotion of social justice and development. Before elaborate each one of the key characteristics, it is crucial to recognize that the cooperative movement is fundamentally based in the Rochdale Principles. These principles serve as the philosophical bedrock of cooperativism, guiding its practices and operations. They originated from the standards established by the Rochdale Pioneers and continue to be upheld by the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA), which acts as the global custodian of cooperative values and ideals.

Concerning the key characteristics, the first one – democratic principles- McPherson, Paz and Immanuel identify it as directly related to the philosophical basis of the cooperativist movement [31]. It means that all the Rochdale Principles is embedded or woven into participation, transparency and inclusion, which align with the values necessary for effective democratic processes . They encourage participation from all members, allowing diverse voices to be heard and fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility within the cooperative community. In turn, the second characteristic, related to community engagement, which is related to the building trust capacity. This is discussed by McPherson, Paz, and Immanuel in the sense that, by working as communities, defined by geography, interests, and associations, cooperatives help individuals transcend their differences [31]. This communitarian approach is essential for building trust and understanding among diverse groups, which is fundamental for social cohesion and peace [34]. Many authors highlight this item relating cooperatives and concept of social capital. For this reason,

it is important to mention that theoretical frameworks provide valuable insights into the role of cooperatives in fostering social cohesion and stability. According to Putnam's Social Capital Theory, social networks and trust are fundamental components of social capital that contribute to community well-being and cooperation [35]. Cooperatives, by their very nature, facilitate the creation of social networks and trust among their members, which can play a relevant role for social cohesion. It means that through the establishment of mutual support systems and shared goals, cooperatives help to strengthen the social fabric of communities. In the same sense, Coleman's Social Capital Theory further supports this view by emphasizing that social capital involves the norms and networks that enable collective action [36]. Cooperatives embody this principle by promoting collaborative efforts and collective decision-making, which enhances trust and cooperation among members. By fostering environments where members work together towards common objectives, cooperatives build social capital that contributes to social stability.

In addition to social capital theories, the Lederach's Conflict Transformation Theory provides also a framework for understanding how cooperatives can address structural inequalities and promote collaborative problem-solving. Lederach argues that transforming conflict involves addressing underlying structural issues and building relationships that support peaceful coexistence [37]. This can be observed in the cooperative behavior due to the fact that cooperatives can be seen as platforms for dialogue and cooperation that address and mitigate structural disparities. By involving diverse stakeholders and promoting equitable resource distribution, contributing to resolve conflicts and transforming societal relationships in consonance with Lederach's theory.

This aspect, from a sociological perspective, highlight the cooperatives capacity as mechanisms for inclusive economic development, reducing social inequality, and fostering a sense of community [38]. By providing economic opportunities and promoting social interaction, cooperatives enhance social integration and stability. This integration is vital for creating cohesive communities that can withstand social and economic pressures.

Nonetheless, Sponardi provides a critical examination of social capital within cooperatives, challenging the prevailing assumption that social capital inherently leads to positive outcomes such as improved economic performance and enhanced trust among members [39]. The author argues that this view is overly simplistic and fails to account for the complexities of social interactions within cooperatives. While social capital can foster networks and norms, it can also create negative dynamics that hinder performance. A significant contribution of Sponardi is its proposal to shift from a collectivist understanding of social capital to an individualistic perspective, emphasizing that social capital should be viewed as a resource benefiting individuals rather than a collective asset [39]. This approach aims to offer a more accurate representation of how social relationships function within cooperatives and how they can impact individual members differently. Sponardi challenges conventional wisdom about social capital in cooperatives and calls for a more critical, nuanced approach that recognizes both its potential benefits and drawbacks, aiming to enhance the understanding of how social relationships impact cooperative functioning and economic performance [39].

Differently from Spognardi, McPherson, Paz, and Immanuel reinforce the previous understanding of Ledereach's theory that

can be applied to the cooperative role in conflict resolution, stating that cooperatives employ their own mechanisms for resolving conflicts at the local level, which can also be effectively applied in peacebuilding scenarios [31,39]. These mechanisms are instrumental in fostering dialogue and collaboration, given that cooperatives are engaged in community-building activities. This view is supported and explained through equitable resource distribution and promoting mutual cooperation among conflicting groups as mentioned before. By providing sustainable livelihoods they try prevent the resurgence of conflict creating jobs, distributing resources fairly, and alleviating economic tensions that could otherwise escalate into further conflict [30].

In other words, the establishment of cooperatives observed by this development characteristic has suggested to be an effective tool for different reason: reducing rural poverty, enhance efficiency and productivity in rural areas through the shared acquisition of inputs and machinery, empower producers with bargaining power and facilitate access to larger markets, integration of producers with supply chain actors and address gender issues and support the development of local knowledge and the creation of social capital. Although not directly related to the key characteristic mentioned, but the support of cooperatives underscores the role of small producers in ensuring rural viability, particularly in enhancing food security and in this scenario it is possible to argument that cooperatives often facilitate the establishment of these connections among small producers once that by forming cooperatives, they can benefit from capacity building, knowledge dissemination, and peer learning.

The last characteristic mentioned by McPherson, Paz, and Immanuel is related to social justice [31]. This characteristic, like the others, is interrelated and encompassed by the umbrella of democratic principles. However, it is particularly relevant to economic and ethnic issues within peacebuilding efforts that can be examine, especially in its aim to promote inclusion and equality. Social justice is a fundamental aspect of the cooperative principle of economic participation of members, which ensures equitable distribution of resources and benefits among all members [40]. This principle is crucial in addressing post-war challenges in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where ethnic divisions, economic disparity, and a lack of trust have been significant obstacles. Cooperatives help bridge ethnic divides by ensuring that all members, regardless of their background, have equal opportunities to contribute to and benefit from collective resources. This inclusivity fosters economic equity, as cooperatives work to mitigate disparities by distributing profits and opportunities fairly [41]. Furthermore, the cooperative model supports trust-building by creating a common ground for diverse groups to collaborate on shared economic goals, thus promoting social cohesion and reconciliation in a post-conflict context [42].

Methodological Framework

This study adopts a qualitative methodological approach that integrates content analysis, ethnographic research, and a comprehensive literature review to explore how cooperative enterprises can contribute to the process of democratization and reconciliation in a context characterized by nationalism and ethnic tension. To ensure a comprehensive understanding of the local context, the research employed an institutional ethnography that considered both international organizations and local entities, thereby providing a hybrid perspective on the research. This approach included insights and data from a multi-ethnic women's cooperative Žena, situated in Bratunac, Bosnia and Herzegovina, key institutions such as the Regional Cooperation Council for

Southeast Europe (RCC), which offers critical perspectives on the political dynamics and collaborative efforts necessary for peacebuilding; the United Nation Organization for Food and Agriculture (FAO) Office in Sarajevo, which focuses on agricultural development; Care International in Sarajevo, which plays an important role in supporting and promoting cooperatives; the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA), which reinforces the understanding that cooperatives are relevant to addressing the socio-economic and political challenges identified in the region and support the activities of cooperatives in a global scale.

Based on the data collected from reports, strategic plans, project evaluations and interviews, a content analysis was conducted to identify patterns and trends aligned with the literature review. This analysis focused on documenting the types of support offered, the target areas of intervention, and the outcomes achieved, aiming to map cooperative contributions and identify key areas where cooperatives have been particularly effective in promoting community cohesion and sustainable development. Simultaneously, the literature review performed positions this research within the broader academic discourse on peacebuilding, cooperatives, and community resilience. Thus, this literature review encompassed both theoretical discussions and empirical studies, providing a robust theoretical foundation to guide the research.

The axis of analysis is established by systematically crossing the identified weaknesses, challenges, and gaps—such as the complex ethnic landscape, economic disparities, fragmented political systems and building trust and reconciliation—with the opportunities, potentialities, and contributions that cooperatives offer, including democratic principles, community engagement, conflict resolution, and the promotion of social justice. This cross-analysis is essential, as it directly informs the study's ability to respond to the central research question of how can cooperatives effectively contribute to the democratization process and the promotion of social cohesion and peacebuilding in Bosnia.

A Cross-Analysis of Post-Conflict Challenges and Cooperatives in Bosnia and Herzegovina

The complex and multi-layered challenges facing Bosnia and Herzegovina in its post-conflict reconstruction are deeply rooted in historical, socio-economic, and political contexts that have perpetuated division and hindered the process of building a cohesive society [43]. The research's attempt to explore the potential contribution of cooperatives to democratization and reconciliation within such a context, where ethnic tensions remain a significant barrier to lasting peace, lies in analyzing the intersection of these challenges with the inherent strengths of cooperatives. For this reason, the study present areas where cooperative models can be most effectively applied to address Bosnia's specific post-conflict needs and that can be applied in other contexts.

Ethnic Diversity and Cooperative Conflict Resolution

The ethnic diversity within the country, while a potential source of cultural richness, has been exploited politically, leading to divisions and, ultimately, to the violent conflict of the 1990s. The complex ethnic landscape continues to present significant obstacles to nation-building and democratization. The ability of cooperatives to address conflict resolution can be highlighted in this particular context. Particularly, in the situation of Bosnia and Herzegovina - where ethnic divisions were central to the conflict - cooperatives has been offering a platform for collaboration among diverse ethnic groups, fostering mutual understanding and trust. Countries with a

similar background in terms of conflict, like Rwanda, agricultural cooperatives played a crucial role in facilitating reconciliation between Hutus and Tutsis following the 1994 genocide [15]. In 2005, the Rwandan government recognized cooperatives as feasible tools for poverty alleviation and implemented measures to develop robust and viable cooperatives. Cooperatives like the Ineza have been inclusive, welcoming women from all ethnic backgrounds and allowing survivors and perpetrators to work together on common economic goals. This inclusivity has shifted the focus from past grievances to collective economic survival, fostering collaboration and reducing ethnic tensions. Moreover, the cooperative environment has provided safe spaces for members to support each other, creating a sense of belonging and empathy. Supported by government policies that promote social cohesion through cooperative development, these initiatives have not only contributed to economic recovery but also played a crucial role in long-term peacebuilding, helping to restore trust and unity in communities previously torn apart by conflict [15].

In Colombia, for over five decades, the country experienced severe armed conflict involving the government, guerrilla groups such as the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), paramilitary forces, and drug cartels. This prolonged violence caused significant economic instability, particularly in rural areas, disrupting agriculture and local economies. The conflict also led to deep social fragmentation, with communities divided by violence and mistrust among different ethnic and social groups. Millions of Colombians were displaced, facing vulnerability and loss of livelihoods. The dominance of illicit economies and the limited capacity of governance structures have exacerbated these issues, complicating efforts to restore stability and rebuild essential services [44]. According to the research of Cooperatives Europe (CEDP), cooperatives have played an interesting role in addressing the challenges of economic instability, social fragmentation, and the vulnerability of displaced populations caused by long-standing conflict. By providing small producers with access to markets, fostering dialogue and collaboration among diverse groups, and supporting displaced individuals with essential services, cooperatives have helped stimulate local economies, rebuild trust, and promote social cohesion [15].

In the specific case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, *Žena* cooperative can be seen as a visible example of overcoming these ethnic differences. *Žena* cooperative was established in December 2000, originating from a women's association called *Maja Kravica*, which sought to overcome the challenges faced by rural women. Since its inception, the cooperative has been dedicated to empowering women in rural areas, encouraging them to play a vital role in the development of society by promoting respect for women and ensuring access to resources and opportunities. Although their primary focus is on raspberry plantations, their activities are not limited to this; they have expanded into other products and services, including greenhouse production. The cooperative's members emphasize that the establishment of *Žena* and its impact on rural life, both technically and materially, as well as in advisory and social aspects, has significantly improved the quality of life, providing security for its members and their families.

United under the idea of economic empowerment, women from the rural area of Bratunac municipality have formed the *Žena* agricultural cooperative, where women's labor is recognized, appreciated, and rewarded. This multiethnic cooperative receives support from CARE International in carrying out its activities. According to cooperative members, this support mainly pertains to bureaucratic aspects, such as registration, followed by logistical

assistance in establishing necessary structures. However, it is acknowledged by the cooperative members that decision-making processes, needs, and priorities are determined locally by the members themselves.

The inclusion facilitated by participation in the cooperative allows for a natural chain reaction, where efforts are inevitably rewarded. Beyond the connections and support, a network of assistance forms around the cooperative, stemming from community inclusion and development. The *Žena* cooperative serves as a feasible example of how ethnic differences can be overcome. Through the cooperative, members from diverse backgrounds work together towards common economic and social goals, thereby fostering a strong sense of community and mutual respect that transcends ethnic divisions, according with the president of the *Žena* cooperative.

This situation can be explained, partially, by the fact that the cooperative model inherently resists exclusion and promotes collective decision-making by the Rochdale Principles. Each cooperative principle ensures a broad democratic aspect that, when fully observed, enables social cohesion, particularly from an individual perspective, even though the framework is designed for the collective, for the community. In this case of the ethnic complexity discussed, as McPherson & Immanuel have argued, cooperatives operate on the principle of "one member, one vote", ensuring that all members, regardless of their ethnic background, have an equal say in decision-making processes [30]. This first step in a cooperative peacebuilding process establishes equality and the same conditions for all involved, which helps to reduce disparities, segregation, and inequalities in an ethnically turbulent and complex environment, as seen in Rwanda, Colombia and even in Bosnia and Herzegovina. This democratic structure is particularly interesting in post-conflict scenarios, as it can serve as a microcosm for broader societal governance. By fostering inclusive participation, cooperatives can assist in this situation breaking down the barriers of ethnic division and promoting a culture of cooperation and mutual respect. For this reason, McPherson, Paz & Immanuel further emphasizes that cooperatives are not merely economic entities but are also social institutions that can contribute in healing divided communities by creating shared economic interests that transcend ethnic lines [31].

Economic Disparities and Social Justice

Another challenge that emerged as a consequence of the conflicts in Bosnia and Herzegovina is related to economic disparities. These economic disparities have not only deepened social divisions but have also hindered the country's development and integration into the broader European economy [45]. In this case, cooperatives are well recognized due to their connection with the social economy issues, development aspects and an possible alternative as third-way model - on one hand, it operates independently from market practices, and on the other, it is not tied to a state-owned enterprise [46,47].

The International Cooperative Alliance (ICA) underscores that cooperatives are designed to meet the economic needs of their members, often providing access to markets, capital, and resources that individuals alone might not be able to secure. According to the ICA, the capacity of cooperatives to address economic disparities can be seen in a report and in a document from the organization: the World Cooperative Monitor and the Guidance Notes on the Cooperative Principles. The 2023 World Cooperative Monitor highlights several points where cooperatives can overcome economic disparities through their embedded values of social justice. The Monitor informs that the total turnover of

the top 300 cooperatives and mutuals globally reached 2,409 billion USD in the 2023, reflecting their substantial economic impact and capacity to positively influence local economies. Notably, in developing economies, like in India, cooperatives such as the Indian Farmers Fertiliser Cooperative (IFFCO) and the Gujarat Cooperative Milk Marketing Federation Limited have excelled, ranking first and second respectively in turnover over GDP per capita. This also emphasizes the cooperative participation in thriving and providing essential services in less affluent regions, overcoming these economic challenges and disparities.

This situation presented by the World Cooperative Monitor can be better understood by the ICA's Guidance Notes on the Cooperative Principles, as it is within the cooperative principles that this capacity for economic inclusion and social justice is rooted. According to the document, the cooperative base - in its history and foundation - resides in reducing poverty and wealth inequality both within and between local communities. Therefore, this economic aspect is part of the essence of cooperatives, reflected in their history and fundamental principles. It is clear that it is necessary to differentiate between established situations and countries with cooperative traditions from those with recent initiatives and specially those countries that still are suffering from conflicts. These are distinct situations, which is why the potential of cooperatives is mentioned and illustrated in cases where this advantage can be measured and perceived.

This cooperative capacity is notably presented in the Rochdale Principle of economic participation, which involves primarily three other aspects. Firstly, fair distribution: the benefits of the cooperative are divided equitably among members based on participation rather than invested capital, promoting a more equitable distribution of wealth. Secondly, participation in management: members are involved in the management and economic decisions of the cooperative, ensuring that all voices are heard and promoting greater inclusion and social justice. Finally, reinvestment and development: a portion of the surpluses is reinvested to improve services and expand the activities of the cooperative, directly benefiting communities, especially those that are more disadvantaged [48].

This collective economic aspect is particularly relevant in post-conflict contexts where state structures may be weak, and the private sector is often dominated by a few powerful actors and economic elites who frequently perpetuate a liberal conflict resolution model. In the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, cooperatives like Žena, Frutti di Pace, among others, are offering ways to decentralize economic control and distribute wealth more equitably in an inclusive process [15]. Thus, by pooling resources and working collaboratively, members can also achieve economies of scale, improve their bargaining power, and increase their incomes. In a theoretical perspective, this also corroborates with the Galtung concept of positive peace, especially when thinking about these aspects related to peacebuilding through economic, development and social issues [32].

Fragmented Political System and the Democratic Principles

As a direct reflection of the conflicts in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the fragmentation of the political system or even the institutional situation of the country, represent one of the most complex points that are also a power-sharing arrangements established by the Dayton Agreement. This fragmentation has often resulted in paralysis at the national level, with different ethnic groups pursuing their own agendas rather than working towards a common national vision. Institutionally, this is also evident in the country's

geography and in the way the administration is represented and organized across the territory. In this aspect, the contribution or participation of cooperatives can be highlighted in relation to governance. The cooperative model of decision-making is both inclusive and effective, and as a local entity, it can inspire and even support perspectives of participation, democracy, and inclusion from a bottom-up approach, meaning from the local level to the national level.

Cooperatives, through their emphasis on democratic governance, provide a model of decision-making that is both inclusive and effective. The International Labour Organization (ILO) has recognized that cooperatives can play a significant role in promoting democratic practices at the grassroots level, which can, in turn, influence the broader political culture. This recognition is formalized in several key documents: Recommendation No. 193 on the Promotion of Cooperatives (2002), the information guide on ILO Recommendation No. 193, and the Guidelines for Cooperative Legislation. These regulations and recommendations from the ILO highlight the connection between democratic principles and cooperative models, illustrating their relevance and applicability even in contexts with fragmented political systems.

According to Recommendation No. 193 on the Promotion of Cooperatives

The promotion and strengthening of the identity of cooperatives should be encouraged on the basis of: (a) cooperative values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity; as well as ethical values of honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others; and (b) cooperative principles as developed by the international cooperative movement" (Paragraph I.3).

This excerpt highlights that the strengthening of the cooperative identity should be based on values such as democracy, equality, and solidarity. In fragmented political systems, like in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where social cohesion and inclusion can be challenging, cooperative principles provide an inclusive and democratic model of governance that can help promote social cohesion and stability. The ILO Recommendation, as mentioned earlier, does not clearly indicate whether the cooperative model is effectively promoting the establishment of new cooperatives in the country. However, it is evident that international organizations and other stakeholders have increasingly encouraged and supported the formation of cooperative enterprises in the region, especially those with a multiethnic profile, such as Žena, Frutti di Pace, and others [15]. Additionally, the document emphasizes that cooperatives play a significant role in promoting sustainable development and social inclusion:

Measures should be adopted to promote the potential of cooperatives in all countries... to improve social and economic well-being, taking into account the need to eliminate all forms of discrimination" (Paragraph I.4).

This means to say that ILO suggests that cooperatives can contribute to social and economic well-being by addressing discrimination and promoting inclusion, which can be particularly relevant in contexts where political systems are fragmented and social cohesion is needed, as developed in the literature review. For this reason, the institutional context of Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the political system is fragmented, once again a cooperative aspect can be useful to help - anchored in the idea of positive peace of Galtung - and inspire as examples of local governance, that can support communities, not only in the institutional situation, but also in ethnical aspects, as can be seen in some cases already observed

in some multi-ethnic cooperatives in Bosnia and Herzegovina [15,32]. The achievement of cooperatives in providing services and managing resources can demonstrate to the broader population and neighbor community that democratic governance is not only possible but also beneficial for all. This, in turn, can help to build trust in democratic processes more broadly, contributing to the stabilization of political system, democracy and social cohesion as a spread-over effect.

The SEE 2030 Strategy, a plan developed by the Regional Cooperation Council of Southern Europe (RCC), highlights the necessity of enhancing regional cooperation and integration across the Western Balkans. This strategy aims to achieve sustainable economic growth, reduce poverty, and improve social inclusion while supporting ecological and digital transitions without compromising private sector competitiveness (RCC-SEE 2030 2021). A key aspect of this strategy is leveraging social capital to strengthen both intra- and inter-regional integration, which is critical in politically fragmented environments, as in the region of Western Balkans.

The European Commission's report on the social economy identifies significant challenges for social enterprises, including cooperatives, in the region. These challenges include a lack of regulatory frameworks, inadequate public recognition, and burdensome administrative requirements [49]. This lack of support hampers the growth and impact of cooperatives, despite their potential to contribute to regional development. In this regard, it is interesting to mention the specific case of Bosnia and Herzegovina in contrast with other cases mentioned and discussed in relation to the previous report.

The SEE 2030 Strategy addresses these issues by emphasizing the role of the social economy sector, including cooperatives, in achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for example. It advocates for the active involvement of civil society, the private sector, and local authorities, highlighting the importance of subsidiarity and local engagement in implementing regional strategies (RCC-SEE 2030 2021). By incorporating cooperatives into regional management structures and supporting platforms like Employment and Social Affairs Platform 2 (ESAP2), the strategy can create synergies that enhance regional cohesion and, in turn, positive peace.

Cooperatives, with their democratic principles and commitment to social values, are well-positioned to address these issues, mainly the political and institutional fragmentation. With this background they are able to support a model of inclusive governance and community engagement that can help bridge divides and foster social cohesion from a bottom-up perspective. International organizations such as the FAO, ILO and ICA recognize this alternative role of cooperatives in democratic process and social cohesion at the same time that support cooperatives as catalysts for social and economic development, demonstrating their value in overcoming challenges associated with fragmented political systems.

In this context, as previously discussed, the challenge of political fragmentation is evident on a national level. However, it can be mitigated through external support from international organizations and other countries. On a local level, cooperatives have the potential to act as catalysts for broader processes, especially if their successful models are replicated by communities with similar goals and inspire other associations and organizations.

Building Trust and Fostering Reconciliation

The last challenge to be highlighted concerns the building of trust, which is one of the greatest hurdles of the Bosnia and Herzegovina context. The lack of trust is often the reason why many reconciliation initiatives and attempts fail to be effective. From the perspective of cooperativism, there are practical examples of the cooperative ability to build social capital, but there are also criticisms regarding this aspect [35,36,39]. Nevertheless, the ability of cooperatives to create spaces for dialogue and cooperation is well recognized. For this reason, this initial step can be seen as a pathway to establishing relationships and, consequently, rebuilding trust. Therefore, within the democratic framework in which the Rochdale Principles are situated, one of the key aspects that facilitates the building of trust and social capital lies in the economic interest of the individual, which is secured within all the Rochdale Principles. Nonetheless, despite the individual interest, the cooperative model encourages collaboration rather than competition, fostering a sense of shared purpose and collective responsibility [50].

Regarding the experiences of the multi-ethnic women's cooperative Žena in Bratunac, Frutti di Pace and others, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, they provide a compelling example of trust that represent vehicles for reconciliation. By bringing together people from different ethnic backgrounds to work on joint economic projects, the cooperatives has not only improved the economic well-being of its members but has also helped to build bridges across ethnic divides. This example illustrates the potential of cooperatives to contribute to the broader process of reconciliation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, providing a model that can be replicated in other communities. The same can be observed in the Rwanda cooperative Ineza, for example.

The seven cooperative principles can be collectively mentioned at this point as a comprehensive representation of the democratic aspects inherent to cooperativism, in contrast to the fundamental post-war challenge in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which is to restore the trust lost due to the historical events that culminated in the war. Thus, as part of the many actions that can be remembered, examined, and studied, it is possible to highlight that cooperatives build trust through the foundational mechanisms that are align with their core principles.

Firstly, democratic governance is fundamental to ensure equitable participation in decision-making [51]. This democratic structure fosters a sense of ownership and transparency among members, reinforcing trust. Secondly, autonomy and local control to cooperative operations. That is why unlike externally imposed entities, cooperatives are self-managed by their members, which enhances their legitimacy and credibility within the community [52]. This local control creates a sense of authenticity and reliability, as cooperatives are perceived as genuinely community-driven organizations, also generating trust. Third, the aspect of training in order to provide education about cooperative principles and practices. With this aspect cooperatives ensure that members are well-informed and engaged, strengthening trust through enhanced understanding and competency [51]. Additionally, transparency and effective communication through various channels, including social media sharing their successes and address challenges openly, which helps build a positive image, transparency and strengthens public trust [53].

Collaboration and partnerships with other organizations as another principle amplify the role of cooperatives in community development, reinforcing their societal value and trustworthiness [52]. Lastly, resilience and independence operate autonomously

and sustainably, without excessive dependence on government support, demonstrate their stability and reliability, enhancing member confidence [53].

In summary, the cooperative aspects outlined by the Rochdale Principles, such as democratic governance, help to explain how the lack of trust can be overcome. Through democratic processes, autonomy, educational efforts, transparency, collaborative engagement, and resilience, cooperatives distinguish themselves and excel in such contexts. It is evident that this process is not always conducted independently; therefore, international organizations can and should support, assist, and monitor cooperative initiatives through a joint and hybrid approach led by the local cooperative community. The involvement of international organizations such as Care International, FAO, ICA, ILO, RCC, and others in supporting cooperative initiatives in Bosnia and Herzegovina further highlights the potential of this model. They bring not only resources but also expertise in promoting cooperative development and aiding post-conflict peacebuilding [54-57].

Conclusion

The post-conflict landscape in Bosnia and Herzegovina presents a series of challenges that extend beyond the traditional solutions often proposed by international organizations, which tend to emphasize top-down approaches to peacebuilding. Johan Galtung's concept of positive peace, paves the way for considering alternative actors in the peacebuilding process [32]. In this context, cooperatives—as autonomous associations of individuals united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs through jointly owned and democratically controlled enterprises—can play a significant role in fostering democratization and reconciliation, as can be seen in the Bosnia and Herzegovina context. The interdisciplinary approach suggested here allows for an examination of cooperatives beyond the traditional Rochdale Principles, exploring their potential contributions to the broader peacebuilding agenda.

Specifically, in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, certain cooperative projects have demonstrated their capacity to address post-war challenges, including trust-building, economic development, democratic participation, and ethnic reconciliation. The content analysis presented in this study highlights how cooperatives can contribute to these areas while also offering new perspectives for peacebuilding initiatives. For instance, cooperatives have been successful in fostering social cohesion by creating inclusive platforms for diverse ethnic groups to collaborate, thereby reducing tensions and promoting mutual understanding.

However, despite the promising potential of cooperatives, there are inherent limitations and critiques regarding their ability to address issues related to democratic processes and social cohesion, particularly concerning their capacity to generate social capital. These limitations highlight the need for a nuanced understanding of the cooperative model's role in peacebuilding. Nonetheless, shedding light on cooperatives as key actors in this process may help identify other relevant stakeholders, especially from a local peace perspective. This approach not only broadens the scope of cooperative studies but also enhances our understanding of the multifaceted nature of the cooperative movement and its potential impact on peacebuilding efforts.

This article combines the challenges and solutions based not only on a literature review but also on current examples derived from reports and interviews related to the situation in Bosnia and

Herzegovina and the contemporary contributions of cooperatives. This content analysis, conducted methodologically through four major axes, seeks not only to connect the current problem with the role of cooperatives in addressing it but also to argue that cooperatives can contribute to and even emerge as key actors in peacebuilding processes. Thus, it was possible to link the challenge of ethnic issues with the cooperative capacity for conflict resolution. Similarly, the difficulty posed by economic disparity was contrasted with the concept of social justice inherent in cooperatives. The political fragmentation resulting from conflicts was examined in light of cooperative democratic principles. Finally, the lack of trust was addressed by highlighting the cooperative ability to foster community engagement. This cross-analysis provided a broader perspective to answer the initial research question, exploring the cooperative contribution to the democratization and reconciliation of conflict-affected societies.

Discussing the contribution of cooperatives raises several unresolved questions emerge, leaving room for further research. For instance, while this analysis demonstrates the potential of cooperatives in peacebuilding, more detailed investigations are needed to understand their long-term sustainability and the extent of their impact in varying post-conflict contexts. Future studies could explore the specific mechanisms through which cooperatives contribute to community resilience, the role of local governance in supporting cooperative initiatives, and how these models might be adapted to different cultural and political environments. Additionally, there is a need to examine the interplay between local and global cooperative networks and how these relationships influence the success of peacebuilding efforts. This current contribution attempted to underscore the cooperatives as possible actors in peacebuilding initiative mainly in facilitating process democratization and reconciliation. By integrating cooperative models into broader peacebuilding and development strategies, it is possible to harness their potential to foster dialogue, economic empowerment, and trust-building in post-conflict societies.

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