

LESSONS FROM ITALY

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THE PLATFORM CO-OP ECOSYSTEM AND THE ROLE OF MUNICIPAL INSTITUTIONS

A Report by

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About the Institute for Digital Cooperative Economy

The Institute for the Cooperative Digital Economy (ICDE) is the research division of the Platform Cooperativism Consortium. Established in 2019, its research covers the emerging cooperative digital economy, which is a relatively unexplored domain in fields like anthropology, political science, sociology, history, law, and economics. The cooperative digital economy is rapidly expanding and is closely linked to labor and cooperative studies. The ICDE's work also focuses on finance, entrepreneurship, and organizational studies in business schools, as well as governance and corporate structure, which are critical subjects in law schools.

At the ICDE, we recognize that scholars, technologists, artists, community organizers, and cooperators equally contribute valuable insights to the development of a more just and equitable digital economy. Therefore, the Institute's mission is to provide applied and theoretical knowledge, education, and policy analysis to bridge the research gaps in the emerging cooperative digital economy. Learn more at <https://platform.coop>

1.

INTRODUCTION

This study aims to continue my inquiry into one of the key challenges researched by the Institute for the Cooperative Digital Economy (ICDE).¹ Namely, in this report, I investigate how municipalities may foster the development of the cooperative digital economy in their administrative divisions as fundamental actors of a platform cooperative ecosystem. Indeed, the purpose of the Institute is to identify best practices and relevant case studies to be shared among the platform cooperative global movement members and dialogue with different and distant realities to favor mutual learning. In order to contribute to this effort, I will focus my attention on the Italian ecosystem.

Nathan Schneider describes platform cooperativism as “an emerging network of cooperative developers, entrepreneurs, labour organizers and scholars” that “is developing an economic ecosystem that seeks to align the ownership and governance of enterprises with the people whose lives are most affected by them”.² However, Trebor Scholz et al. also recognize the role of municipal institutions within the ecosystem in enabling and sustaining the development of platform cooperatives.³ To do that, they compare seven local governments taken from different parts of the world (i.e., California, Kerala, Barcelona, Bologna, Berlin, Paris and Preston) and identify twelve best practices that can be taken as inspiration and implemented by enlightened administrations:

- Mandating procurement policies that sustain platform co-ops
- Implementing solidarity-oriented loan programs
- Realizing public participation in multi-stakeholder platform cooperatives
- Funding research to identify legal obstacles to the cooperative digital economy
- Offering social benefits specifically to members of platform co-ops
- Creating a list of public spaces that could be offered for free or used at a low cost
- Providing public regulation by certifying their organizational status as cooperatives
- Improving the conditions of platform co-operation by leveling the playing field

- Providing platform co-ops with fiscal advantages
- Funding platform co-op incubators
- Creating a municipal advisory committee
- Including platform co-ops in the political programs of parties

From this perspective, it is clear how municipalities, together with the private sector and civil society actors, have an essential and complementary role to play in a platform cooperative ecosystem. Therefore, they can adopt different strategies for fostering the development of an alternative organizational model to platform capitalism and its negative consequences, such as low-quality jobs, rent extraction, bogus self-employment and algorithmic surveillance.⁴

Summarizing the previous list of policies thanks to the insights of Stacy Sutton, municipalities can thus act as top-down catalytic developers, as backers of bottom-up grassroots movements or they can mix the two options in order to create enabling environments and support cooperative enterprises.⁵ “Combining these two strategies and cultivating complementary initiatives result in stronger partnerships that strengthen the local ecosystem”.⁶ This is perhaps one of the main lessons that the platform cooperative movement can learn from Italy, and also serve as a concrete answer to the possible criticism that, by involving public institutions in the ecosystem, the 4th ICA principle, i.e., Autonomy and Independence, would be betrayed.⁷

But why does this approach make so much sense for digital platforms in general, and platform cooperatives in particular? Digital platforms are increasingly acting in modern societies as essential and shared infrastructures of our everyday life, providing public utility-kind services.⁸ This is true throughout the spectrum: ranging from enabling instant communication between people and connecting them at a global level (messaging, emails, social networks) to exercising direct control over municipal transportation networks and traditional service provision channels when they operate at the local one.⁹ And it inherently prompts the debate over whether additional stakeholders from the communities where platforms operate should be granted different kinds of property rights over those platforms, replicating with a polycentric governance structure the plurality of actors who are ideally involved in a platform ecosystem.¹⁰

The platform cooperative movement is precisely proposing that all the stakeholders impacted by platforms' operations should have a say in how those platforms are concretely organized and work. To do that, federations and alliances between different platform co-ops have also been promoted in the global spirit of the movement itself.¹¹ My contribution to this effort will be to isolate some lessons from three case studies of Italian cooperative and socially and solidarity-oriented digital platforms, and analyze the complementarities they developed with the public administration. This will be done in sections four, five and six of this report. In contrast, in sections two and three, I generally present the Italian cooperative ecosystem and the methodology applied to assess the case studies. The final section will briefly summarize what we have learned from the three case studies.



2.

THE ITALIAN
COOPERATIVE
ECOSYSTEM

Italy, particularly in the Emilia-Romagna region and its county seat Bologna,¹² is characterized by a well-established history of direct support of public institutions and political parties to the cooperative movement for promoting an alternative path of industrial development and, sometimes, mutually advantageous experimentations of private-public-voluntary partnerships.¹³ Typically, these alliances take place in Italy by adopting an ecosystem perspective, and thus are particularly interesting to be analyzed here.¹⁴

Ecosystems can be described as alternative organizational structures generating different motivational drivers both as compared to occasional market exchanges and vertically integrated hierarchies. Thanks to them, interdependent firms,¹⁵ but even individuals and civil society actors, can coordinate themselves with other complementary public institutions to mutually support each other and flourish in a highly competitive environment. A related concept is that of network modes of resource allocation, which have indeed been defined as non-traditional institutions where “transactions occur neither through discrete exchanges nor by administrative fiat, but through networks of individuals engaged in reciprocal, preferential, mutually supportive actions”.¹⁶

However, what distinguishes the Italian cooperative ecosystem from traditional business ecosystems, including modern platform ecosystems, is that the mutual relations that connect the different agents are more democratic and less organized around a central hub.¹⁷ This feature prevents, in the long-run, asymmetries and abuses of power to be reintroduced and inefficient outcomes produced due to hold-up¹⁸ risks.¹⁹ For this reason, cooperative ecosystems and multi-stakeholder cooperatives, which are the most coherent corporate governance structure for substantiating at the firm level an ideal ecosystem, offer several competitive advantages to their members; such as greater resilience to crises, greater satisfaction and trust, better jobs, community involvement and higher accountability due to the broader distribution of information and control among stakeholders.²⁰

The critical role of municipalities, such as in the case of Bologna, in promoting this path of development has been recently reconsidered by exponents of the so-called new municipalism movement.²¹ Analogue ideas have also been formulated with the concept of new mutualism and the related one of the civil economy.²² In this sense, there are different local ecosystems in Italy that can be referred to. After their legal recognition with the

Act 381 of 1991,²³ several multi-stakeholder social cooperatives have for example been born in various local contexts as organizational alternatives to markets and states to provide welfare services for the benefit of all their ecosystem stakeholders.²⁴

Furthermore, some Italian economic sociologists have already made the attempt to adapt these ideas to the digital economy.²⁵ More specifically, they argued that the original ideals of the sharing economy contained some elements of reciprocity and that they should be recovered, in direct opposition to the prevalent individualistic and extractive business model typical of the giants of Silicon Valley that curved instead digital ecosystems to their private advantage, betraying those ideals.

Combining these insights with the recent efforts of the European Union in elaborating new rules for guaranteeing fair working conditions for gig workers and protecting platform cooperatives,²⁶ we can thus claim that there is a space to develop a European alternative to Silicon Valley rooted in the principles of solidarity, mutualism and proximity. Accordingly, Italy can be a paradigmatic place for taking best practices and directly incubating platform co-ops. Indeed, the same Article 45 of the Italian Constitution states: “The Republic shall recognize the social function of cooperation of a mutually supportive, non-speculative nature. The law shall promote and encourage cooperation through appropriate means and ensures its character and purposes through appropriate control mechanisms”.²⁷

In this spirit, it can also be mentioned a discussion recently developed in Bologna by important exponents of the Municipality, including the current mayor, for creating the Italian Co-op Valley in the city.²⁸ At the same time, I think it is important to focus and consider first the lessons that existing case studies can teach us and learn from their successes and failures before working on the narrative dimension, which nevertheless remains crucial.²⁹

3.

RESEARCH
METHODOLOGY

For the reason described above, I have decided to analyze more in-depth in my report three different but paradigmatic Italian case studies of cooperative and socially and solidarity-oriented digital platforms.³⁰ To do that, I conducted preliminary desk research studying their websites and all their available documents. Then, I run a series of semi-structured interviews with the most relevant stakeholders involved in these projects (see Appendix), e.g., founders, managers, academics, activists, and public administrators. The dimensions we discussed together were the history, value proposition, business model, organizational form, competitive advantages, paradigmatic elements of all these platforms and then a specific focus on their relationship with municipal institutions.

Scholz, focusing in particular on the American context, which is traditionally connected with a form of start-up-driven mentality, describes the concept of platform cooperativism as having three parts: “first, it is about cloning or creatively altering the technological heart of the sharing economy. [...] second, platform cooperativism is about solidarity, which is sorely missing in this economy driven by a distributed and sometimes anonymous workforce. [...] and third, platform cooperativism is built on the reframing the concepts like innovation and efficiency with an eye on benefiting all, not just sucking up profits for the few”.³¹ The projects we will analyze are all influenced instead by the tradition of Italian cooperativism and social entrepreneurship. Therefore, on the one hand, more substantial is the role played in these experiences by public regulation, enlightened local governments and existing cooperatives aiming to develop digital platforms in order to scale their already established activities.³² While, on the other hand, they exemplify how different organizational forms can set a series of social purposes for their corporate activities, like the ones that should characterize platform co-ops.

The projects I will analyze in the rest of the report are the following:

- Vicoo Platform³³: which represents the attempt of Legacoop Bologna (the local affiliation of the National League of Cooperatives) and AlmaVICOO (university research center for the training and promotion of the cooperative enterprise) to mobilize a series of public, private and civil society actors in order to create a municipal ecosystem of the cooperative digital economy and a social support structure capable of incubating and accelerating platform cooperatives within the municipal territory. To reach this goal, the promoters of the project started by taking inspiration from pre-existing experiences of platform co-ops

created in Bologna (such as Consegne Etiche and Fairbnb.coop) and by the established history of cooperation that characterizes the city. Then, they involved public institutions, the University, private and cooperative actors, and the local community in co-designing the project in accordance with the existing needs of the different stakeholders.

- WelfareX®³⁴: it is a multi-tenant platform founded and owned half by the Consorzio Nazionale CGM, a national consortium of social cooperatives, and half by the IT company Moving, which is a private company specialized in platform creation, built around the proposition of a new concept of welfare. More specifically, it aggregates on a single platform, customized on a case-by-case basis according to the necessities of the local consortia of cooperatives and institutions that decide to activate it, all the welfare services of a specific territory together with public and company welfare in order to make them more accessible and answer the needs of as many citizens as possible thanks to the creation of a customer-friendly digital marketplace. I will specifically consider the case of the Municipality of Biella, where the platform Biella Welfare³⁵ has been customized by the local consortium Il Filo da Tessere.
- So.De³⁶: a socially and environmentally sustainable delivery project from Milan created in partnership by the members of the local association Rob de Matt with the Municipality of the city for offering last-mile deliveries and proximity services in the neighborhood of Dergano (and then in the whole town at a later stage of project development) for the benefit of local shopkeepers, civil society and the environment.

4.

FIRST CASE
STUDY:
VICOO
PLATFORM

“Toward a new platform economy: An ecosystem, inspired by cooperative enterprises principles and models capable of involving and protecting users, workers and local communities.”³⁷

Drawing on the previous experiences of Consegne Etiche,³⁸ Fairbnb.coop³⁹ and ABC Digitale,⁴⁰ the purpose of Vicoo Platform is to mobilize consolidated connections in the city of Bologna between public institutions, the private sector, the local university and civil society actors in order to create a supportive ecosystem capable of incubating and accelerating platform co-ops within the municipal territory. For co-designing the project, AlmaVICO⁴¹ and Legacoop Bologna⁴² have thus convened a synergistic alliance of public, private and voluntary actors and chosen Almacube⁴³ (University incubator) as the business developer.⁴⁴

The project team first started by studying in-depth the three experiences mentioned above and wrote a white paper delineating the context, methodology and project outline.⁴⁵ In this way, they aimed to take best practices from each of these experiences and involve local communities in the co-designing process by applying the techniques of design thinking⁴⁶ and open innovation.⁴⁷ In this phase, they also decided to implement the theoretical principles of the Platform Design Toolkit⁴⁸ (whereas a practical implementation has been explored in the third and last phase of the project). However, they recognized limits of competencies and financing in all the case studies that challenged their medium/long-term viability and economic sustainability. Furthermore, they realized that other important issues that need to be solved for scaling platform co-ops are the governance challenge and the identification of the business model.⁴⁹ They thus decided to focus during phase two of the project on studying ABC Digitale, the most mature of the three, and continuing that experience by developing a prototype of a community platform for the digital education of children.⁵⁰

Their idea was that, by creating a platform ‘from scratch’,⁵¹ they could develop innovative strategies for tackling the challenges faced by previous projects and be capable then of accelerating other platform cooperatives by replicating the same pattern in a ‘learning-by-doing’ perspective. The third phase is thus still ongoing and is focused on the creation of Cinny.⁵² The platform should be launched soon with a third white paper. With Cinny, they aim to solve the governance problem by directly involving local communities to answer their concrete needs. Moreover, they are also working on a business model capable of guaranteeing economic sustain-

ability to the platform. To do that, they partially rely on Coopfond,⁵³ the National League of Cooperatives investment fund, for financing the project in the early stages of development.

Piero Ingrosso, Vice President of AlmaVICOO and Head of Innovation and Communication of Legacoop Bologna, is the leader of the Vicoo Platform project. In this context, one of his primary focuses is devoted to elaborating on the business strategy and value proposition of Cinny.⁵⁴ He also has the role of connecting and enabling the dialogue between all the ecosystem stakeholders and involving them in a multi-stakeholder governance structure. Furthermore, as the former Head of Digital Innovation, Strategic Partnership and Business Development of Open Group,⁵⁵ he had a link with ABC Digitale. Therefore, he was well aware of the social problem of the digital divide and the necessity of educating younger generations on the use of digital tools. In creating a new platform, it was thus natural to mobilize that knowledge and connections and focus on those problems by involving teachers and families in co-designing the platform. With the other partners of the project, such as Legacoop, the University and other social cooperatives operating in the education field, they are now working on initiatives for training digital educators with the appropriate know-how and solving competence-related issues.

Cinny has hence been defined as an 'onlife' experience,⁵⁶ i.e., something in between a digital marketplace, where different educational services are collected together, and a real-life cooperative, in which users are the direct owners. Thanks to Cinny, families will be capable of choosing, according to their specific needs, between different cooperatives associated with the platform, appropriately targeted and certified by a specific committee, where to buy the services they need for their children. Competitive advantages of this project will be the territorial dimension and community involvement, and the privileged relation with public institutions thanks to the role of the Fondazione Innovazione Urbana (Foundation for Urban Innovation),⁵⁷ which is a partner of the project. However, according to the same promoters of Cinny, more active involvement and endorsement of public institutions and the recognition of digital education as an essential component of the public welfare system would be needed after the launching phase for scaling appropriately and building a sufficient network of users and providers. Another feature of Cinny will be then the protection of users' data since they are at the same time co-operators and so have the legitimate right to co-govern the platform.

Chiara Faini of the Fondazione Innovazione Urbana is on the advisory board of Vicoo Platform. During our interview, she stressed how the Foundation was first created thanks to the efforts of the Municipality of Bologna with the precise role of fostering the local ecosystem and connecting the needs of the territory and the answers of public institutions. Accordingly, their mission is helping to incubate and co-design new grass-roots initiatives and public policies to meet those needs. For example, they have been the promoter of Consegne Etiche and partners of ABC Digitale. Moreover, they have also already worked together with AlmaVICOO on educational and inclusion projects financed by European Structural Funds⁵⁸ in the context of the PON (Programma Operativo Nazionale) project for metropolitan cities (National Operational Programme Metropolitan Cities 2014-2020),⁵⁹ a program of public interventions for favouring sustainable urban development funded by the EU. For all these reasons, it was natural to involve them in the development of Cinny. This direct involvement of municipal institutions in the cooperative economy is probably the main lesson we can learn from Bologna.

5.

SECOND
CASE STUDY:
WELFAREX

“Local services in times of need. The education of children, assistance to the elderly, the care of people with disabilities, support for the most fragile and much more.”⁶⁰

WelfareX® is a multi-tenant platform founded by the Consorzio Nazionale CGM (Consorzio Nazionale della Cooperazione Sociale Gino Mattarelli),⁶¹ which is a network of Italian social cooperatives, and Moving,⁶² a private company working from 2001 in the IT sector in the fields of platform creation and digital transformation that acts as technical partner. To manage the project, the two have created the company CGMoving Srl,⁶³ half controlled by CGM on a cooperative basis and half by Moving. The platform is accessible on a territorial level by citizens, employees, local partners and beneficiaries of public measures by presenting itself as a customized marketplace for welfare services. Basically, public institutions, in partnership with actors from the Third Sector, put in the marketplace all the services they offer or contract out and authorize within their territories and then also leave space to let new providers do the same. To the general public, it is thus made available in the same platform a certified and variegated pool of welfare services offered by different providers they can choose from. Accordingly, the project is tailored to create a new community of welfare stakeholders and to overcome traditional dichotomies between different kinds of welfare, allowing pre-existing social cooperatives to compete in the market without compromising their social purposes.

As a matter of fact, at least in Italy, there is definitely a great interest in welfare platforms as alternatives to platform capitalism, like the growing amount of literature and projects that emerged in the last few years certifies.⁶⁴ In this fashion, Paolo Venturi and Flaviano Zandonai speak of the ‘digital factor’, namely, the transformative potentiality that comes from experiences able to combine the organizational advantages of digital technologies and the mutual interdependencies of local networks of stakeholders.⁶⁵ Innovative socio-technical welfare infrastructures like welfareX® are surely good examples of that. More specifically, as we anticipated, welfareX® is built around the proposition of a new concept of welfare that aggregates on a single platform, customized on a case-by-case basis according to the necessities of the local municipalities and cooperative consortia that decide to implement it, public services of welfare and those offered by local cooperatives in a certain jurisdiction in order to make them more accessible to the customers and answer their emerging needs. Personal services, educational services, recreational services, informational services

on public measures and bonuses distributed to tackle poverty can all be aggregated into the platform. In this way, the platform combines public, company and territorial welfare.

From an ecosystem perspective, even if the national platform welfareX® is developed by a private company, local cooperatives can thus act in synergy with municipalities to adapt the digital code to their specific necessities and use this instrument to enter the market and compete with the incumbents. For example, the territorial dimension of the project, as the interviewees pointed out, has had a great impulse almost everywhere due to the new needs created by the Covid pandemic. This can be defined as a 'coding' operation,⁶⁶ i.e., existing cooperatives that decide to adopt a platform, and open a new and underexplored path for the development of the platform cooperative movement itself.⁶⁷

In the case of welfareX®, customization is made possible by the so-called welfare managers, professional figures framed and hired by the affiliated local consortia who develop the connections between CGMoving, the local ecosystem and the community needs. More specifically, they are people who work in the social consortia of the territory and promote the platform at that level with individual customers and private companies and thus know how to organize it better. Even if indirectly, the mandate of public institutions and local consortia in the platform customization guarantees, therefore, bottom-up participation in the platform governance (while other ideas for making the governance even more inclusive are still under debate). For example, an academy has been recently created to provide adequate know-how to welfare managers. Furthermore, welfareX® might also allow to analyze users' data, even if this feature has not been exploited yet at its full potential and would raise some problematic issues about how to manage these data cooperatively. In this way, platform customization could be tailored and improved for adapting provision and communication activities to the necessities of the final beneficiaries in different contexts.

An important example is Biella Welfare. The platform here, co-financed also through European Structural Funds, is partially integrated within the municipal welfare provision system for, e.g., the supply of bill and rent vouchers or educational and informational services. Moreover, the local consortium Il Filo da Tessere,⁶⁸ which is the private social actor that has started the project in this case, is really active in the development of the territorial welfare channel and the integration in the platform of all the

services offered by the affiliated social cooperatives. Local beneficiaries can thus find the great majority of the welfare offer available in Biella within a single website and select the cooperative and the price they want to pay (in some instances, e.g., for particularly vulnerable people, controlled or covered directly by the Municipality itself) for receiving the specific service they need. This is the experience that adopts welfareX® that shows probably the highest degree of territorial embeddedness and where the cooperative principles are better included in the platform's operations.⁶⁹ Indeed, the active function of the consortium favours the integration and cooperation between public, private and voluntary actors of the local ecosystem. An example of the plurality of the Biella ecosystem is testified by the role played by a private banking foundation, Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Biella, which in part finances the project locally to lower the prices for users. In this way, during the Covid emergency, several essential services were offered at a lower cost to vulnerable people. Finally, Biella Welfare not only includes in the platform the services provided by the local consortium but also contains a specific and purely informative section, Biella Conciliazione,⁷⁰ on the citizens' rights and welfare services offered in Biella in the field of work-life balance such as childcare, family care and home care.

Among other things, the project of welfareX® shows thus the importance of applying traditional cooperative principles to new digital infrastructures in order to preserve both cooperative values and financial stability and build socially and economically sustainable long-lasting initiatives aiming to pursue the common good. From this perspective, we can appreciate the relationship of Biella Welfare with Agenzia per l'Italia Digitale,⁷¹ a public agency promoting the digitalization of public administration at the local level. In its relationship with the public administration, the platform works thus as an innovation driver that proposes itself for innovatively managing public services. Ultimately, the objective is to develop a multi-stakeholder governance structure for managing the platform as a shared infrastructure by involving all the actors of this complex ecosystem.

6.

THIRD CASE

STUDY:

SO.DE

“SO.DE: SOCIAL, SOLIDARITY, SUSTAINABLE DELIVERY. We are the first ethical delivery service in the city of Milan. Riding our bikes and cargo bikes, we deliver home shopping, clothes, books, documents, furniture, dreams and desires. Our aim? Representing a sustainable alternative to the current delivery model, creating decent and protected jobs, fueling a virtuous circle of conscious consumption and minimizing the impact on the environment.”⁷²

The So.De project was born in 2020 by an idea of the members of Rob de Matt,⁷³ a local association specialized in work-inclusion projects for vulnerable people. Previously, the members of the association had already created a ‘café-Bistrot’ in Dergano, a provincial neighborhood of Milan, for training and including in the organizational structure of the restaurant those vulnerable people. Thanks to the motivations and experience they gained in that context, they decided to participate in the civic crowdfunding organized by the Municipality of Milan and, starting with the products of the restaurant, develop a project of social delivery for conducting last-mile deliveries in their neighborhood to the benefit of the local community and shopkeepers. It is a very interesting project to be analyzed from an ecosystem perspective because, even if formally they are not a platform cooperative, by involving first public institutions and civil society actors in co-designing and co-financing the project and then deciding to adopt a platform for its implementation (which is still under development) they have demonstrated how the social and environmental values of the platform cooperativism can be carried out with flexible organizational forms, privileging the needs of local communities to formal definitions.⁷⁴

The civic crowdfunding is an innovative policy carried out for the first time in Italy by the Municipality of Milan for mobilizing community energies, ideas and relations and sustaining bottom-up social and cultural impactful projects developed by Third sector organizations (including social enterprises) for meeting the emerging requirements of our time.⁷⁵ It is an excellent example of purpose economy and social innovation. Indeed, it overcomes traditional over-bureaucratic approaches with new collaborations between citizens and public institutions aimed to accompany and finance ‘city makers’ while leaving them the freedom and space to develop their projects autonomously. It is, therefore, very coherent with the spirit of European policies and the experimental and generative character of the civil economy. Public authorities look indeed with growing interest at crowdfunding as a further option to pursue their policy objectives. For this reason, they often try to include it in the existing mix of financial instruments, especially at the local level. In this case, the organizations selected

by the Municipality of Milan had to prepare their campaigns, trained by a dedicated tutor, and fix a donation goal (40% of total projects' costs). At the same time, the Municipality committed itself to finance with a non-repayable fund grant the rest of the projects' costs (60%).⁷⁶ In 2019, in Montreal (Canada), the civic crowdfunding of the Municipality of Milan was the winner in all categories of the Wellbeing Cities Award 2019.⁷⁷ In 2021, the civic crowdfunding also won the CRESCO AWARD – SODALITAS for sustainable cities of over 100,000 inhabitants.⁷⁸

During its second edition, the one that So.De won together with other eighteen projects, the civic crowdfunding was conducted in the context of the PON (Programma Operativo Nazionale) project for metropolitan cities (National Operational Programme Metropolitan Cities 2014-2020) and developed by the public administration for investing some of the European Structural Funds in ideas aimed at the regeneration of peripheral neighborhoods, even in light of the negative outcomes of the pandemic crisis. For this second edition, two other major players in the Italian crowdfunding industry, namely, the Benefit Company Folkfunding⁷⁹ and Ginger crowdfunding,⁸⁰ were involved in the framework of a broader collaboration agreement in the sectors of the sharing and circular economy called Milano Collabora.⁸¹ More specifically, Folkfunding provided the reward and donation-based platform Produzioni dal Basso⁸² (the first Italian crowdfunding platform) and Ginger crowdfunding the training and tutoring services to the projects selected. The general idea behind this initiative was to promote sustainable urban development by fostering private-public partnerships in line with the objectives of the European Urban Agenda.⁸³ By reaching and passing the fixed target of 25.000 € of crowd donations, the Municipality more than doubled that amount of money through ESFs and followed the development of So.De for a year. Many people participated in the crowdfunding of So.De, with 549 donations that showed how the project was able to truly recognize some community needs and willingness to develop a form of ethical consumption in the delivery sector. The money allowed the founders of So.De to hire and train five food-delivery riders with fair and dependent contracts and start to serve other places in the city outside Dergano. The civic crowdfunding has thus proved to be an interesting way to solve the financing challenge typical of platform co-ops by employing bottom-up resources instead of venture capital in the early stages of the development of a new sustainable business.⁸⁴

Coherently with the purpose of the civic crowdfunding and its inherent ecosystem-driven orientation, after ending the year of municipal training, So.De also won the Get it!⁸⁵ call for mentorship for socially, culturally and

environmentally impactful start-ups of the Fondazione Social Venture Giordano dell'Amore,⁸⁶ impact investing specialized arm of the banking foundation Fondazione Cariplo.⁸⁷ This time, the call was looking for impactful projects in the fields of sustainable mobility and smart city promotion. So.De has thus decided to be incubated and accelerated by ACube,⁸⁸ certified incubator of Avanzi⁸⁹ (an independent company based in Milan and promoting sustainability through social innovation). ACube has specialized for more than ten years in incubating ideas and businesses with high social and environmental expected impacts in the context of 'go-to-market' strategies. In this way, So.De has been able to hire other riders (now they have eight riders and 30% of them are workers with certain kinds of vulnerabilities), reach a municipal dimension of service provision and refine its value proposition based on the promotion of a sustainable alternative to the actual model of delivery, creating dignified jobs and fostering local consumption by also reducing negative environmental impacts thanks to the use of bikes and cargo bikes for the deliveries. All these goals have been reached without compromising the project's financial sustainability.

To manage this new step, So.De has been formally re-conducted under the limited liability company Magma Srl Impresa Sociale. What is interesting is that this new stage allowed the founders to integrate into a new social enterprise the competencies, governance structure and financing that were lacking in the first stage (something similar to the necessities pointed out by the promoters of Vicoo Platform) without losing the original spirit and value proposition of the project. In spite of the difference in the entrepreneurial cultures of the two cities where they operate, both Vicoo Platform and So.De show hence how it is impossible to reach the expected social and environmental outcomes without also achieving the economic stability of the businesses, and how the mobilization of the local ecosystem is an essential element for this process.



7.

CONCLUSION

To conclude the report, I want now to briefly summarize the main lessons that we can draw from the Italian ecosystem and the three case studies analyzed above.

Municipalities can play a fundamental role in the platform cooperative ecosystem. For example, they can directly act as partners (as in the case of Vicoo Platform), they can sign specific agreements (as in the case of Biella Welfare) or they can create tailored crowdfunding campaigns (as in the case of So.De).

Platform co-ops have the potentiality to act as essential and shared infrastructures of our daily life, providing public utility-type services. From this perspective, an interesting path is to consider how welfare systems can be reimagined in the age of platforms.⁹⁰

It is important to focus on the data dimension and implement cooperative principles into data management.


It is also important to have a polycentric and democratic cooperative ecosystem and represent it in the governance structure of the platforms. This creates several competitive advantages for platform co-ops, such as greater resilience to crises, greater satisfaction and trust among stakeholders, better jobs, community involvement and higher accountability due to the broader distribution of information and control.

Other paths for developing platform co-ops can be considered—apart from cloning the hearth of digital platforms and implementing the cooperative principles into start-ups created from scratch. Particularly, several pre-existing cooperatives could benefit from adopting digital platforms to scale their operations.

Considering the movement's global dimension, other benefits can also come from imagining national consortia and international federations between platform co-ops, using European financing channels, sharing best practices and adopting flexible organizational structures to convey cooperative purposes.

The financing challenge is a fundamental aspect to consider and, for addressing this challenge, it is important to focus not only on the narrative dimension but on concrete failures and successes experienced by existing platform cooperatives.

It is finally crucial to tailor multilevel strategies and public support to the different moments of the life-cycle of the platform cooperative projects.



APPENDIX

List of Interviewees

Piero Ingrosso	Vice President for Innovation, Communication and HR Development of AlmaVICOO, Head of Innovation and Communication of Legacoop Bologna
Mario di Nauta	Innovation Manager of Almacube (certified incubator, accelerator and innovation hub of the University of Bologna)
Chiara Faini	Culture and Innovation Manager of the Fondazione Innovazione Urbana (independent foundation chartered by the Municipality and the University of Bologna for acting as a bridge between public institutions and grassroots needs and initiatives)
Flaviano Zandonai	Open Innovation Manager Consorzio Nazionale CGM, co-author of the book Neomutualismo together with Paolo Venturi ⁹¹
Francesca Scarinci	Director of CGM Moving - welfareX®
Ilaria Botta	Welfare Manager of the Biella social consortium Il Filo da Tessere, responsible for the customization of welfareX® in the city of Biella

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Lucia Borso	Co-founder of So.De
Naima Comotti	Co-founder of So.De
Teresa de Martin	Co-founder of So.De
Annibale d'Elia	Project Director for the Municipality of Milan in the area of Urban Economy, Moda and Design, which is the office in charge of the civic crowdfunding (formerly in the area of Economic Innovation and Entrepreneurship Support)



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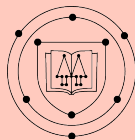
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