THE UNIVERSITY
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This thesis has been submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for a postgraduate degree (e.g. PhD, MPhil, DClinPsychol) at the University of Edinburgh. Please note the following terms and conditions of use:

The very process of living together *educates*:

Learning *in*, *from* and *for* co-operative life

in rural Malta

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Abstract

This dissertation contributes to our knowledge about the development of Maltese co-operatives, placing the process in a wider historical and ideological perspective. More importantly it delves into the learning that goes on in and around co-operatives. Finally it contributes to the discussion about the potential which co-operatives have in enabling communities to work towards a more equitable world. Three were the guiding questions. What do people learn *in* the co-op, as they get involved in setting up and running a community-owned enterprise? What do people learn *from* the co-op, as they interact with it in its day-to-day business? What do people learn *for* the co-op, as they turn towards co-operation to create a more equitable world? To answer these questions, I first conducted research about the origins of co-operation in Britain, the dissemination of the model across the British Empire, and its development in Malta. Then I conducted a case study research with two Maltese rural co-operatives, one at the village of Mġarr, the Mġarr Farmers' Co-operative Society, and the other located at Manikata, *Koperattiva Rurali Manikata*. I interviewed ten co-operators from each case study, followed up by a group discussion with each co-op's committee. I analysed the transcripts by making reference to authors who have contributed to the discussion around democracy, critical citizenship and critical pedagogy. The case studies show that *in* co-operatives people learn how to turn personal problems into collective struggles. They develop their personal and collective identities in their activism. They learn to assume responsibility in contributing towards the common good, becoming aware that taking action is a learning process at the individual and the collective level. The case studies also show that people learn *from* co-operatives in different ways. The co-operatives under study both organised non-formal educational activities open to the members of the community. They provided goods and services to the wider community, and customers learned as they interacted with both co-ops. Activists from both co-ops sought to build bridges with civil society and with political authorities in their search for alliances over to achieve their objectives. In doing so they could open up learning spaces beyond the confines of the co-op. Finally the research makes the case *for* co-operatives by showing how they have the potential to give voice to local communities. They can 'claim spaces' where individual abilities are turned into collective strength through participation in democratic dialogical processes. Co-operatives can scale up the struggle for legitimacy around local structures of feeling as they develop into oppositional or alternative discourses to the status quo.

Lay Summary

Co-operatives originated as a popular response to satisfy the needs of communities living in difficult social and economic conditions in mid-nineteenth century Britain. People tend to learn and develop as human beings as they interact with others in their quest for a better quality of life. Thus, democratic co-operative communities can to be learning spaces where people grow as they create spaces where individuals meet, discuss and act. The British colonial authorities adopted the co-operative model to spur local development in the colonies, making them more productive and less reliant on the British Exchequer. This was how the co-operative model took off in Malta. However, some local communities in Malta appropriated this community-based organisational model in order to suit their own aims. My interest in co-operatives is from the perspective of the educational experiences they create. My research questions address the following: what do people learn *in*, *from* and *for* co-operatives? To answer these questions I conducted a case study with two rural co-operatives in Malta. I interviewed ten co-operators from each co-op and also conducted a group discussion with each co-op's committee to discuss the findings. From these interviews it transpired that when participating *in* co-operatives people learn how to co-operate to bring about changes that will be of benefit to their collective interests and the wider community. They become aware that as they do so, they learn both at personal level and also as a group. They realise that in their struggles they might find themselves at odds with governments and authorities. To deal effectively with the latter, they learn that they need to seek support from different groups within society at large. The case studies also show that people learn *from* co-ops. They learn when they attend training courses organised by the co-op, or when they are provided with information about the goods and services they acquire from the co-op. People also learn when co-op activists carry out outreach activities, while seeking support among civil society organisations, or while negotiating with the authorities. When they do so, the potential of the co-op as a learning space expands beyond the confines of the co-op itself. Finally the research makes the case *for* co-operatives as a tool which communities can use to organise themselves in order to voice their concerns. Co-ops create spaces where individuals can come together so that they do something about the world they live in to make it more equitable and just for as many people as possible. The limit of co-operation lies in the fact that it can only be a successful model if people trust each other and are ready to open up areas for co-operation with others in matters related to their everyday lives.

Declaration

I declare that this thesis has been composed solely by myself and that it has not been submitted, in whole or in part, in any previous application for a degree. Except where stated otherwise by reference or acknowledgment, the work presented is entirely my own.

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Date

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1   Introduction: Where it all began

Writing about his life as a contemporary shepherd in the Lake District, James Rebanks (2015) describes ancient rights enjoyed by the owners of Herdwick sheep flocks on the fells. In his own words,

> This is all a strange hangover from a feudal past when we paid dues (including bearing arms) to the Lord of the Manor in return for the right to graze the poor mountain land. But no dues have been paid for a long time now. The aristocrats either disappeared or couldn't be bothered to contest our rights, because we are troublesome and stubborn when crossed. It was more effort than it was worth, so we, the peasants, won. We are a tiny part of an ancient farming system and way of life that somehow has survived in these mountains because of their historic poverty, relative isolation, and because it was protected from change by the early conservation movement (Rebanks, 2015, p.11).

Although he speaks of sheep herding in the Lake District as a surviving relic of the past, Rebanks's autobiographic account also documents the effects of national and global economic and political developments on the herdsmen of the Lake District, epitomised in Rebanks's own struggle to make a living by combining sheep herding with other economic activities. Perhaps not very differently, farmers and herdsmen in the Mediterranean island of Malta have had to grapple with the same issues in the last sixty five years.

Figure 1. Malta, a small archipelago at the crossroads of the Mediterranean Sea

Google Maps 2016a

My father's family used to keep goats to support the meagre income grandpa used to get from his job as a cleaner in an old people's hospital. But that occupation and the knowledge around it was swept away by the growing urbanisation of the town I came from, Qormi, in the heartland of the island around the Grand Harbour. Housing estates and factories ate away all the grazing land; within the span of a decade all the goats' herds were gone from town, agriculture was reduced to a marginal activity and a local farmers' co-operative barely survived as a relic of times past.

In 1995 I was catapulted into a hamlet in the North-west of the island of Malta, Manikata, down the hill from another small village, Mġarr. This was a largely agricultural district where crop production was a very important element of the local economy. The whole environment was strange to me. Social customs, the smells, the sounds, the dialect spoken, were somewhat removed from the lively urban life I was accustomed to in Qormi. But my limited knowledge about my family tradition of keeping goats, helped me establish some common ground where to connect with local

farmers, building new friendships as I built a new life for me and my new family in this alien district.

Figure 2. The Maltese Islands
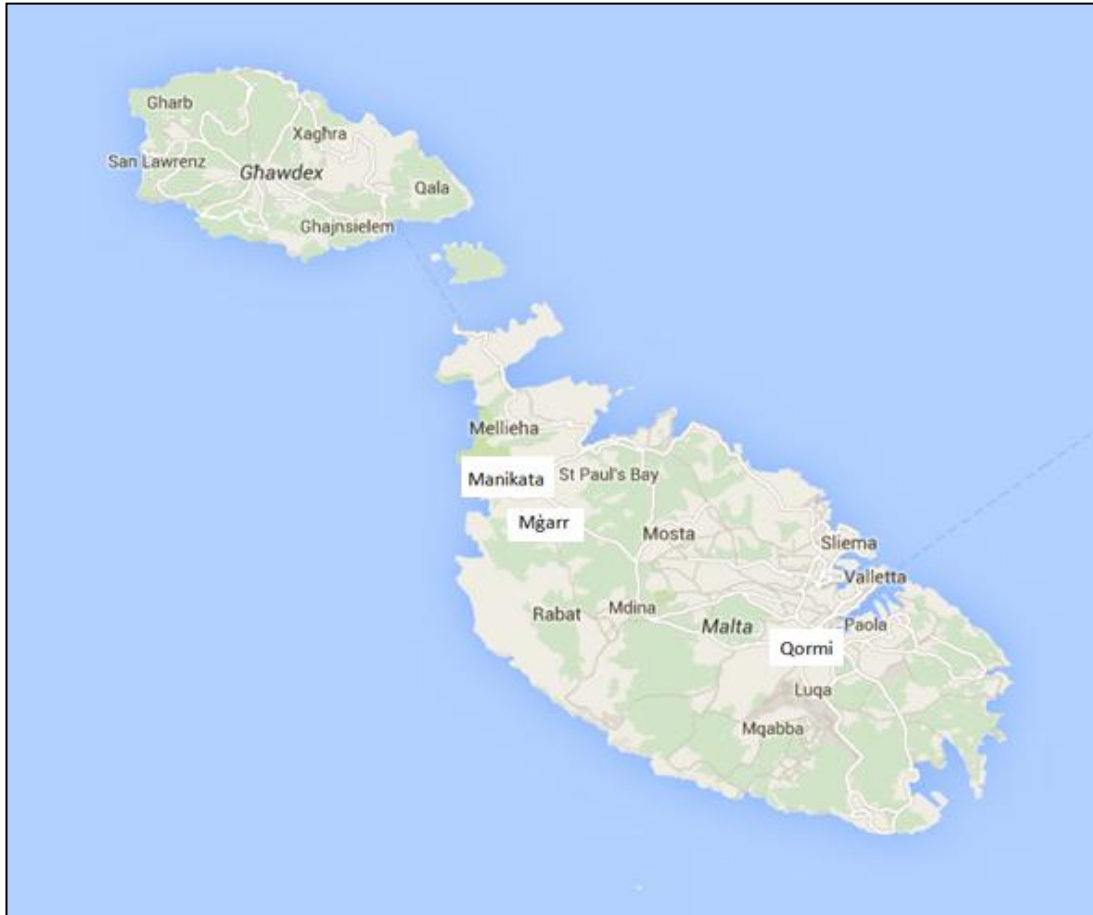
Based on Google Maps 2016b

Between 2002 and 2006 I conducted an action research project in Manikata as part of an M.Ed. in adult and community education. The aim of the project was to learn about the learning that went on in the community as people involved themselves in parish activities. It was an exciting project which brought me into contact with many people and enabled me to get soaked in the people's culture, to use Paulo Freire's metaphor (Freire, 1993, p.161). I learned about how people addressed personal issues by getting involved in collective activities that fostered personal and collective

empowerment. I discovered personal and social dynamics that belie the apparent stillness of the place.

While writing the final dissertation to be presented to the University of Malta, the skills which the community had learned throughout the years were put to the test. It was June 2005. Tenant farmers on government-owned land were expecting the usual notifications to pay the rent due every 15th of August, Catholic feast of the ascension of Our Lady, a custom carried on from the times of the Knights of St John. Instead, farmers received notifications that their tenancy was being terminated because land was needed to build an 18-hole golf course on one side of the village and a by-pass on the other. In July 2005 two farmers approached me, probably because of the central role I had just played in the action research project, in order to help them get organised in a bid to avert the impending disaster. What followed was a two year campaign that resulted in government shelving its plans (Kotzebue, 2012, p.39-51). This too was a learning experience for all involved in the action group. When the ordeal was over the participants did not disband. They used the skills learned to set up a co-operative in order to implement local development initiatives. *Koperattiva Rurali Manikata* was set up in August 2007. Here started my interest in the Maltese co-operative movement, as I moved from having a remote ideological interest in co-operation as a socialist alternative to capitalism to getting involved in running a co-op.

In 2009, a colleague from the Faculty of Education of the University of Malta asked me whether he could bring some foreigners, who were in Malta for a conference on environmental education, to visit the Manikata Rural Heritage Trail. He wanted me to speak to them about the experience that led from the anti-golf course and anti-by-pass campaign to the setting up of the Manikata co-op. During that walk along the Rural Heritage Trail, one of the projects set up and managed by *Koperattiva Rurali Manikata*, I met Michael Peters from the University of Surrey who asked me to write a paper for a book he was editing about creative ways how to combat climate change. It was a moment to step back and reflect on what we had managed to achieve in five years of community activism, on what we had learned at individual and at collective level, and on what we were hoping to achieve through co-operation. The result was 'Empowering farmers to react and to act: from an anti-golf course pressure group to a community-based farmers' cooperative' (Cardona, 2010). This thesis follows up on that paper by delving deeper into the issue of learning through participation in community-based co-operatives.

1.2 Learning as a social process of engagement

Foley (2004) distinguishes between four types of adult learning: formal education, non-formal education, informal learning and incidental learning. He describes formal education as one that is "organised by professional educators, there is a defined curriculum, and it often leads to a qualification." Non-formal education "occurs when people see a need for some sort of systematic instruction, but in a one-off or sporadic way." Foley then argues that informal learning "occurs when people continuously try to learn from their experience. It involves individual or group reflection and discussion, but does not involve formal instruction." Finally, incidental learning is the process of accumulating knowledge tacitly while performing one's occupation or profession (Foley, 2004, p.4-5).

Learning in co-operatives is mostly non-formal and informal. Members of the co-ops involved in this study learn non-formally through short courses, seminars or meetings organised for them by the co-op management according to the needs of the co-op or of its membership base. Members of the management committee learn informally when, during their committee meetings, they reflect upon the operations of the co-op, discuss difficulties and challenges, propose solutions, devise implementation plans, set goals and analyse the results.

Argyris and Schön (1998) further theorise about informal learning by proposing two models: single loop learning and double loop learning. Single loop learning occurs when participants in a collective endeavour analyse the results of their actions, identify errors or lack of attainment, examine processes, propose the necessary corrections within the same cultural paradigm and value system that hold the collective together, and start a new process hoping to achieve the desired results, monitoring the process as they do so. Double loop learning takes place when collective analysis within the organisation leads participants to reflect not only on the processes but also on the values, norms, strategies and assumptions that are at the basis of daily routines and practices, what the authors call 'theories-in-use' (Argyris and Schön, 1998, p.35-36). It's a deeper kind of informal learning where participants learn by reflecting not only on what they do and how they do it but also on why they do it. It is a learning that challenges assumptions that have been taken for granted, unquestioned, considered as a matter-of-fact, taken to be a given. It is a kind of informal learning that leads participants in an egalitarian enterprise such as the small co-ops featuring in this research to reflect on the raison d'être of their organisation, on the relationships

between their co-op, other co-ops, federative co-operative structures, the local community, interest groups, government institutions, European establishments and global economic forces.

Seen from another perspective, using Paulo Freire's metaphor of "reading the word and the world" (Freire, 1990, p.60) non-formal learning is when participants in the collective endeavour of the co-operative see the need to widen their ability to 'read the word', that is, to master technical knowledge that other professionals are able to pass on to them. It is when professional people are asked to provide external support to enable participants within an organisation to learn new words, new knowledge, in order to widen their individual and collective lexical and epistemological register. Informal learning is when the participants use the new 'words' (that function as conceptual tools) to analyse the organisation in which they operate, its value systems, beliefs and the norms that underlie its practices. Informal learning is thus engaging in praxis, that is, using the 'word' in order to 'read the world', engaging critically with the tenets that underlie the organisation and with the wider environment around it, in order to change the organisation but also to influence that wider environment, in the hope of building a more equitable world.

Foley (2004) argues that

As people live and work they continually learn. As Stephen Brookfield (1986:150) has noted, most adult learning is not acquired in formal courses but is gained through experience or through participation in an aspect of social life such as work, community action or family activities (Foley, 2004, p.5).

This research takes the cue from my paper (Cardona, 2010) and investigates the learning that occurs while participating in the collective endeavours of *Koperattiva Rurali Manikata* and of the neighbouring Mġarr Farmers' Co-operative Society. It examines both co-ops within the context of Maltese farmers' co-ops, the Maltese co-operative movement, the proliferation of the co-operative model in the British Empire, as well as Malta's historical passage from British colony to member state of the European Union.

1.3 Contribution to knowledge

This dissertation aims to make three important contributions to knowledge. First, by delving into historical sources, it aims at putting the development of Maltese co-

operation into a wider historical perspective, from the days of Empire, through to Independence and the setting up of the Republic of Malta, to the dawn of European Union membership. Secondly it sheds light on what kind of learning goes on inside Maltese rural co-ops as they come to grips with an economic and political scenario that is always more driven by a European Union-wide obsession with becoming a strong and competitive economy. In EU circles adult education discourse has been hijacked to mean almost exclusively preparation for employability. Unfortunately one gets the impression that the mention of civic competences in EU documents is almost always a clumsy palliative to mitigate the effects of the misuse of the interchangeable terms of Adult education, Adult learning and Lifelong Learning. The dissertation will deal with the 'structures of feeling' (Williams, 1977, p.128) developing within rural co-operatives as they oscillate between taking oppositional and alternative positions in the face of the neo-liberal stances of the EU. It will analyse the kind of learning that goes on inside the co-ops, at the individual and the collective level as these processes develop. Thirdly the dissertation aims to contribute towards a discussion about how co-operation and co-operatives can contribute to new possible worlds, new ways of how people can relate to each other within different kinds of communities, how people can relate to the environment, how people can reinvent communal and national governance structures that foster learning and growth on the basis of equity and social justice for all. This debate should go beyond what Raymond Williams calls 'official consciousness' (Williams, 1977, p.131), that is, the present hegemonic economic discourse focused on competitiveness and employability. Rather, it should engage with 'practical consciousness', a consciousness that would need to struggle for legitimacy, one that engages with the real issues of humanity and humanisation, education, learning and growth.

1.4   The research questions

In order to make this contribution, I formulated two basic questions which I needed to research and find answers to. These were: Is participation in a local rural co-operative a learning experience? What do people learn in and through participation in a rural co-operative? I approached these two questions by asking three focused questions.

1. What do people learn *in* the co-op? That is, what do people learn while participating in the running of the co-op, as elected members of the management committee, as employees or as volunteers?

2. What do people learn *from* the co-op? That is, what do active and inactive members, customers, the local community, or policy makers learn from the co-ops' activities?

3. What do people learn *for* the co-op? That is, how do participants in both co-ops learn how to turn co-operation into a political tool that enables them to envision and create alternative communities where they can exert more control over their individual and collective lives?

Concurrently, I dealt with other cross-cutting themes such as the relationship between an interviewee's level of formal education and his or her participation in the co-op. A second theme was the issue of leadership in both co-ops. A third theme was the relationship between both co-ops and the wider political context at the national and European level. A fourth theme was co-operation as a solution to an ailing agricultural sector. A fifth one was the dissonance between the European Union's emphasis on competitiveness and employability and co-op values of collectively engaging with the negative effects of globalisation and EU federative processes on local agriculture and local ways of life.

1.5 Two Maltese rural co-operatives as an a/typical example

To address the research questions I chose two case studies, two neighbouring co-operatives from the rural North-western region of the island of Malta. They are two small co-operatives set up in different historical circumstances and for different aims. They, however, share one common goal, that of helping two farming communities to deal with their challenges at a collective level.

The first co-operative is the Mġarr Farmers' Co-operative Society (MFCS Limited), an agricultural producers' co-op set up in 1947 as part of a campaign carried out by a Maltese official appointed by the Maltese legislative assembly on the initiative of the Colonial Office. The Mġarr farming community bought into the idea, made the co-operative structure their own, and managed it in different ways along the years to suit their different needs as the macro political and economic environment changed.

Figure 3. The North-West: Mġarr, Manikata and Mellieħa
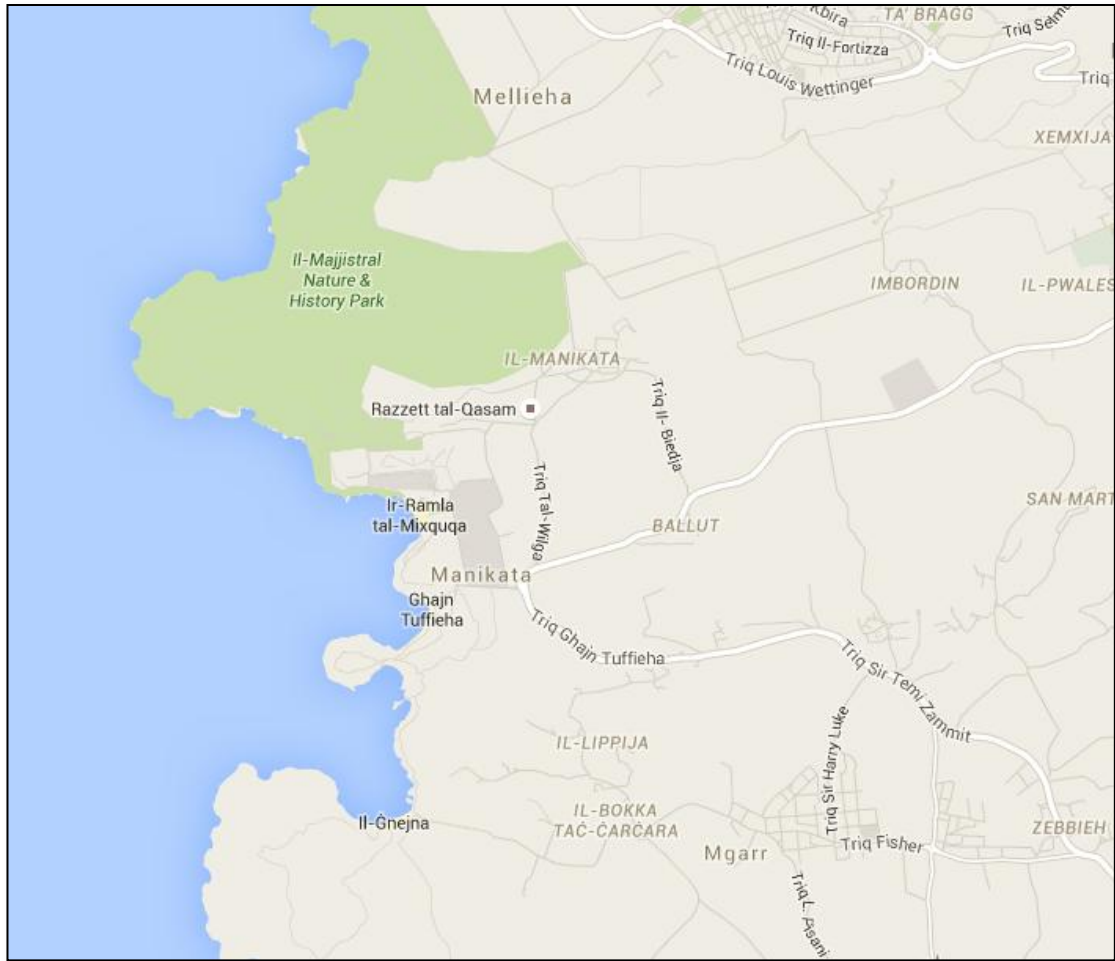
Google Maps 2016c

MFCS is part of a larger network, the Farmers' Central Co-operative Society (FCCS Limited), a secondary co-operative made up of primary agricultural co-operatives similar to MFCS. FCCS and other agricultural co-ops form the back-bone of the Maltese co-operative movement. The original aim for the setting up of both MFCS and also of the secondary co-op FCCS was to organise the selling of agricultural produce, aiming to secure a decent and fair income for farmers. FCCS became the 'middleman' for members of primary co-ops like MFCS. Members of primary co-ops would take their produce to the shed of FCCS at the central market to be sold to retailers. FCCS would then pass on the payments to the primary co-ops to pay their members. It was one of the ways the colonial government tried to restructure agriculture in the immediate post-war period with the epochal political, economic and social turmoil that characterised those times.

MFCS has about 190 members, part-time or full-time farmers who either own small fields or are tenants on government or privately owned land. It is managed by an elected management committee made up of full-time farmers. It also employs four people, two full-time and two part-time. I chose this co-op because it is characteristic of the primary farmers' co-ops set up in the period between 1946 and 1948. It is also probably the most successful of the primary co-ops that make up the FCCS network. There is also a lot going on in the co-op and so it was interesting to see what people were learning in the process. It is also very close to the other case study, just up the hill from Manikata.

The second case study, the *Koperattiva Rurali Manikata*, was set up in very different circumstances. It was set up in 2007 to take over from the Committee for the Safeguard of Rural Life in Għajn Tuffieħa, a local action group set up to oppose government plans for a golf course and a by-pass in 2005. It was set up to propose alternative local development projects that would protect and develop rather than destroy and wipe out the local physical, economic, social and cultural characteristics of the place. The co-op has about 30 members, part-time and full-time farmers as well as residents from the area. It is run by an elected management committee and employs five employees all on a part-time basis. The employees are also members of the co-op and sit on the elected committee. It is a strange mixture of producers' co-op, workers' co-op and social co-op, given its openness to the local community. I chose this co-op because, although it is an agricultural co-op, it is not part of the FCCS network, was born in different political, economic and social circumstances, has a different client base than the Mġarr co-op, has a more organic relationship with the residential community of the hamlet, and has a more varied membership base in terms of educational, occupational and professional backgrounds. Both co-ops were however linked by their relationship with agriculture and its central role in rural community development.

At this point it is pertinent to flag my dual role both as insider and outsider during the research project. In Chapter 5 (see 5.7 below) I describe my involvement with the local action group which was set up in 2005 to oppose government plans for a golf course and a by-pass in Manikata. By 2007 the group had reached its goals, government decided to shelve its plans. In that year we explored various options for the setting up of an entity that would put forward its own proposals for development in the village. We decided to go for the co-operative model and set up *Koperattiva Rurali*

Manikata (KRM) Ltd. Since then, and throughout the whole research period, I occupied the post of treasurer of KRM. I also became active in *Koperattivi Malta*, the federation of Maltese co-operatives, attending meetings there as a delegate of my co-op. With regards to the second case study, Mġarr Farmers' Co-operative Society, two of the employees of the co-op knew me as an occasional customer at their co-op store while I had known very casually the president of the co-op who usually represents his co-op in meetings at *Koperattivi Malta*. With regards to MFCS I was mainly a researcher from outside the institution who was curious to know certain things about what went inside of it. In Chapter 5 I describe how I had to win the trust of the Mġarr president and of the interviewees as the interviewing process evolved. With regards to *Koperattiva Rurali Manikata* the relationship was much more ambivalent. I was an insider with very good knowledge of what was going on from the very beginning, with a finger in the pie in everything the co-op did. I was also working from a position of power within the co-op and also within the Manikata village community. I had served as treasurer of the co-op from 2007 to 2014. I was involved in earlier research in the village related to my Master's degree, I was involved in the setting up of the anti-golf course and anti-by-pass committee, I was a founder member of the co-op and managed the co-op's purse. Interviewees from Manikata were also aware that I could speak both the language of the villagers but also the language of power which a person from the working classes learns when he goes to school, enters university and gets teaching and managerial jobs in the civil service. I was thus in a position of power in relation to those I was seeking information from. I was also aware that interviewees could feel confused by my double position of co-activist and researcher. As co-activist I was an insider, sharing responsibility with my fellow co-operators, a situation that the interviewees knew all that there was to know about. As a researcher I was an outsider who would need to know how interviewees personally felt about certain things, a position that the interviewees were not much accustomed to and that might have put them on their guard on what to say and what not to. In order to turn my insider-outsider position into a strength that would give value added to my research I relied on positionality and reflexivity. In Chapter 5 I describe how I resorted to positionality by expressing my biases and political commitments during the interviews. This enabled the interviewees to feel that what was being discussed during the interviews was not only their views and opinions but also my perceptions and beliefs. I put my stances to the judgements passed during the interviews as much as the interviewees had to expose their own for discussion. At the same time I describe how I had to use reflexivity in order to keep

myself always conscious of the effects that my position of power could have on the way the interviewees were behaving and responding. I believe that 'positionality' and 'reflexivity' have helped me to turn my insider-outsider ambivalence into a strength of the research, banking upon my academic skills, my learning through my very own participation in the processes I was researching, and the very important feedback I was getting from the Manikata interviewees.

1.6   Translation

Translation is never a straightforward task. The interconnection between meaning and culture, and the geo-political or temporal space between the language and cultural background of the source text and target text, all compound the task of wanting to convey a meaning that is as close to the source text as possible and as communicative to the target audience as possible (see for example, Bandia, 1993, p.57). In the dissertation I had to translate two different kinds of texts. One was the translation from Maltese into English of excerpts of the interviews that I carried out with activists from the two case studies on which this study is based. Secondly I translated quotations from two Italian authors which are a very important point of reference to me as a researcher and to this research project in particular.

1.6.1   Translating from the transcripts

The interviews with both Mġarr and Manikata interviewees were carried out in Maltese, the native language of the participants in the research. In most interviews it was not even a standard form of Maltese but a variation of it spoken in the North West of the island. It is very usual for young people whose family speaks dialect rather than standard Maltese to learn both varieties, the dialect at home and the standard form at school and from watching TV. People who are in this situation usually switch from one code to the other according to the setting they are in. Most of the time switching is done automatically and unconsciously. If one finds himself or herself among people who speak dialect, he or she speaks dialect. If the speaker finds himself or herself among people who speak standard Maltese they automatically, often unconsciously, switch to standard Maltese. Some older people find it difficult to speak standard Maltese and are only comfortable speaking their own dialect. Thus the interviews were carried out mostly in dialect with older people who are more comfortable speaking in dialect, with others who were from Mġarr but understood at the outset that I spoke dialect too, and

with others from Manikata who knew beforehand that my first language was dialect. Five out of twenty interviews were carried out in standard Maltese; two interviewees from Manikata did not speak dialect at all; one participant from Manikata and two from Mġarr spoke dialect but probably thought that the interview situation was a formal enough setting to require using standard Maltese.

This variation provided some particular challenges during transcription, since there is no official writing code to transcribe dialect speech. The challenge was also bigger during translation since dialect tends to be more idiomatic and use a more restricted lexical register which at times makes it difficult for people to translate higher order thinking into speech. Thus, in transcription I could notice in certain interviews that a speaker would stop midway through a sentence, expecting me as listener to extrapolate the second and missing part. At other times arguments dealt with technical aspects related to agriculture and cultivation techniques. Some of the jargon was new to me and I had to guess the meaning from the context. All this turned the transcriptions into a representation of a very particular rural culture and rural mode of expression.

Obviously speaking dialect is also part of the social structure of the profile of the typical Maltese farmer in popular perception. But on the part of the dialect speakers themselves, it is also a part of their identity, of their sense of belonging to a community. As one of the Mġarr interviewees who spoke standard Maltese during the interview said,

> I'm not in any way embarrassed if I'm with the farmers and the Minister is present; and when I speak with the farmers I speak in dialect. If I'm with them I'm like them. I'm not going to be ashamed of myself. A farmer has as much dignity as the minister.

The interviewees from both co-operatives belong to a very similar culture, a very particular culture that is shaped by the lexicon it uses, a culture that analyses the world through its own lexicon, its own register of words. Those words, in their turn, are rooted in the culture of the place, the remote area of the North–West which until some decades ago was out of the way of most people's travelling routes. The language, then, both in terms of register and also in terms of being a very particular dialect or variation from the standard language, becomes a key element of the collective identity of the local community, an ingredient of their sense of belonging to a group in a particular territory, with its own ways and customs. As argued by Durdureanu (2011),

> To speak means to choose a particular way of viewing the world, a particular way of establishing contacts. According to Bourdieu, in a wider sense, we are members of a community of ideas and practices through the language we speak. Therefore, language is linked to culture, as a link between thought and behaviour (Durdureanu, 2011, p.52).

This meant that while translating from Maltese into English I had to be aware that I translate as much as possible of the cultural connotations in which the meanings were grafted. Thus, when translating, I not only had to keep in mind the source language and its cultural roots, but also the target language and the target reader with his or her lack of knowledge of the Maltese context.

In translation, 'transcoding' was as important as 'communicating' (Bandia, 1993, p.57) since, it was important to convey not only the meaning of the words in the source text but also making sure that the readers of the target text would understand the meaning outside its cultural context. This was not very easy since as Braçaj (2014) argues, "Translation is not just a literal recasting of a work from one language to another, but is also an adaptation of one culture's values and biases into another" (Braçaj, 2014, p.336). A case in point is the very significance of the word farmer. In the British context the farmer is usually a landowner, managing his or her farm using intensive industrial scale cultivation, inserting themselves in product development chains at regional or national levels. In the Maltese context the word farmer has connotations of ageing couples, working small patches of land tenanted from government or from private landowners following landowning practices that go back as far as the late medieval period when administratively Malta was an outpost of Sicily. Both cultural contexts are far removed from each other and the general perceptions about farmers in both scenarios must be heavily loaded with erratic assumptions. However, as translator in this particular context, I had to ensure that the words I chose in the target language conveyed the closest cultural meaning as in the source language, choosing different English words for the same Maltese word according to the context, (for example by translating the Maltese word *bidwi* sometimes as 'farmer' and at other times as 'tenant farmer') and changing the order of words when necessary, putting the conveying of meaning above the strict fidelity to the source text. What made the conveying of meaning easier than other translations was the fact that this was not a translation of a whole text but the translation of short excerpts inserted into a longer academic text. Thus, I could provide some of the cultural, political and social background to the translation in the preceding text, giving as much information as

needed to ensure that the translated excerpt would make sense to the reader in the way that the interviewee intended when he or she was speaking to me.

1.6.2 Translating the great authors: Milani and Gramsci

In Chapter 2 I make reference to two Italian authors whom I have read in the original. With particular regards to Lorenzo Milani, he consciously used colloquial Italian in his writings and publications. This was because he wanted his books to reach the working classes of post-war Italy. His aim was not to be a part of academia but to spur the lower classes to gain self-consciousness and rebel against the status quo that was keeping them in oppression.

Two texts by Milani could be found in English translation. *Letter to a teacher* (Milani et al., 1996) was translated by Penguin in the 70s but I myself have collaborated with two academics from the University of Malta, Professor Carmel Borg and Professor Sandro Caruana to produce a much more rigorous and extensively researched translation. The first was published in Malta, while a second revised one was published by Sense Publishers (Borg, Cardona and Caruana, 2009 and Borg, Cardona and Caruana, 2013). When I quoted *Letter to a teacher*, I resorted to these published translations. Another book, *Letter to the Judges* (Milani et al., no date), was also available in English (see Burtchaell, 1988). However, I preferred to translate directly from Italian into English because I was not really happy with the choice of certain translated phrases and which I thought were crucial to convey the real meaning I thought Milani had in mind, judging from my extensive research about the author, his life and works. For example, when writing about the oppressors of the weak, Milani uses the word 'forte' which Burtchaell translates as 'strong' while I preferred the word 'powerful' since in my opinion it conveys a meaning that is more in line with the spirit of the text (Milani et al., no date, p.37-38, Burtchaell1988, p.59).

Other writings by Milani are not found in English and so I had to translate them out of necessity. The challenges here were not very different from translating from the Maltese transcriptions, given Milani's consciously colloquial style. Another challenge here was not only one of distance between the source and the target cultural milieu, but also the distance in time. Milani's writings, the issues he raised and the way he and his students engaged with them, are deeply embedded in the social and political tensions that characterised post-war Italy (Borg and Cardona, 2008, p.1-43). Italy was devastated by war, just out from a twenty-year-long fascist dictatorship, a Nazi invasion

from the North and an Allied liberation army from the South. It was a nation characterized by a gaping difference between rich and poor, and a developing industrial economy based on cheap industrial labour. It was also a country of wide cultural differences between those who knew formal Italian and had access to high culture and those who only spoke dialect and were relegated to submission to the powers that be. It was a highly polarised society, where according to Milani (1997, p.220-223), the Church and the Vatican pulled the strings from behind the scenes while the *Democrazia Cristiana* party ran the show of Italian politics by banking upon the submission and manipulation of the masses. On the other hand the Socialist and Communist parties tried to forge a counter-offensive not by enlightening the under-classes but by luring them in alienating ways that were not very different from those used by the centre-right coalition. This was the cultural and political background to Milani's writings and which I had to keep in mind while translating, hoping to transmit Milani's ideas about critical education as well as a sense of the tension that marked the turbulent times in which those ideas matured and were disseminated. It is within this cultural, social and political background that I had to convey such heavily loaded terms as 'Fatherland', 'oppressed', "the affirmation of man's dignity as a servant of God and of no one else" (Milani, 1997, p.242). As with the translations from the transcripts, every quotation from Milani is put in context in the text that precedes or follows it. This makes the conveying of meaning easier since it enables the translator to provide contextual information that would help the reader to get as much as close as possible to the meaning intended by the original author, a process that is mediated through the background research done by the translator.

This holds also for the other translated Italian author, Antonio Gramsci. He predated Milani by a generation and the writings I cited and translated were written mainly in prison where he was serving a long sentence, his only guilt being that he was a communist member of parliament and secretary of the party under a fascist government that did not tolerate dissention from thinking minds that dared to ask and to question. As was the case with Lorenzo Milani, I researched not only Gramsci's writings but also his personal and political life, which like Milani's, was marked by tragedy. Milani was exiled by his Archbishop to the hills of Barbiana and ostracised by the political and clerical class. He died aged forty four from cancer. Gramsci suffered long-term inhuman treatment in different prisons. He died in a clinic in Rome where he was receiving treatment after eleven long years of imprisonment, aged forty-six. He

was separated from his wife and little son and never saw the face of his second son. I read most of his prison notebooks in the Italian original. The notebooks were a way he tried to keep himself alive in prison, reading books, engaging with their themes and writing about them. He was also aware that his writings were subject to prison censorship. Because of this different authors suggest that he wilfully steered away from being clear in what he was writing in order to avoid repercussions from the prison censor (see for example Spriano, 2009, p.XVI). In order to understand better Gramsci's letters I had to resort to other authors such as Peter Mayo and Harold Entwistle (see for example Mayo, 1999, Mayo, 2010 and Entwistle, 1979). This enabled me not only to get at a deeper understanding of Gramsci's thought from my reading of the prison notes in the Italian original, but also to get used to a Gramscian academic discourse that could help me bridge between my personal readings from and about Gramsci, and academic publications about his political writings. These were the walking aids on which I relied when doing the translations from notes written by a ruminating mind in a prison cell into a kind of English that is able to convey the meaning in a way that is understandable by somebody who does not necessarily know all the background to Gramsci's prison writing oeuvre.

1.7   The structure of this study

This study is divided into eight chapters. Chapter 2 explores the meaning of 'Community' in its different aspects and then goes on to explore how people learn within communities. It also deals with issues of democracy and power and how these have an influence on learning processes. It finally explores the link between learning in communities and issues of social justice, as well as the role of leaders in communities. The chapter provides the theoretical framework to the study and is squarely framed in a popular education perspective which draws on the work of Dewey, Freire, Milani, Gramsci and Williams. Chapter 3 explores the development of the co-operative model in the UK and also in the United States, making reference to the pioneering work of Robert Owen and William King. It also outlines how the formula developed in Rochdale proved to be a watershed in the development and mainstreaming of the co-operative as an equitable business model. It then explores the proliferation of the co-operative model in the UK, and its turbulent development in terms of business development but also ideological positioning. Chapter four analyses the way the co-operative model which was developed in the UK was exported to the colonies as a means of promoting

local community development in economies that were still very dependent on agricultural production. In the final part of the chapter I trace the development of the co-operative movement in Malta, from the first short-lived experiments with co-operation in the harbour area to its endorsement by the colonial authorities on the island of Malta in the immediate post-war period. I trace the development of co-operation from a movement largely meant to reorganise agricultural production and marketing to the more recent diversification of the movement into different economic sectors. I also examine the current crisis that has hit the Maltese co-operative movement. Finally I delve into the ideological positioning of the Maltese co-operative movement in relation to mainstream European Union education and economic policy.

Chapter five outlines the research methodology, identifying its strengths and weaknesses. Chapters 6 and 7 focus on the two case studies on which this research is based. Chapter six deals with the Mġarr Farmers' Co-operative Society (MFCS Limited), one of the earliest co-operatives set up in 1947 and still going strong. Chapter seven deals with *Koperattiva Rurali Manikata* (KRM) Ltd., set up in 2007 to replace a local action group that was set up two years earlier. Chapter eight draws comparisons between the two case studies in terms of learning *in*, *from* and *for* co-operation, highlighting non-formal learning processes that occur within the co-ops but also exploring the possibilities co-operation can offer for a different way of organising local socio-political development within the context of a globalised world marked by a drive towards competition rather than co-operation. In Chapter 9 I make some final concluding remarks about co-operatives as community-based institutions that foster learning at individual and at collective level. I also make suggestions for a way forward for both co-ops involved in this study. Finally I reflect on what I have learned in the process of conducting this research.

Chapter 2

Education, community and power

2.1　Introduction

In this chapter I will give some initial bearings to the meaning of the elusive, used and abused term of 'community'. I will resort to Raymond Williams, Mae Shaw and John Gaventa to establish a conceptual paradigm for the term as an inclusive but potentially also exclusive term. I will then discuss the idea of community through John Dewey's voluntaristic view of human collective structures. I will discuss communities as the product of human action where individuals come together to share concerns or aims and find ways how to co-operate with each other in order to reach shared objectives by working within a shared and communicated set of values. Here I also start to link the notion of community with that of co-operative as a community-based collective that fosters communication within its structures but equally engages in dialogue with the surrounding environment. Exploring the possibilities of community further, I then investigate democratic communities as places where people, at individual and collective level, learn as they grapple with real life issues in search of meaning but also in search of developing individual and collective identities. In this sense communities are seen as creative and participative spaces where people learn as they engage in dialogue among themselves and with the world around them. Next, I discuss the possibilities that communities have of making the leap from internal discussion about what is going on in the wider world to effective action, that is, an action that aims at changing what is going on in the wider environment in which individuals, but also communities, are rooted.

Essential in this discussion are the key terms 'structure' and 'agency' (Shaw, 2007, p.27, Sen, 2001, p.5) as well as John Gaventa's power cube as an analytical tool that analyses community action on three levels: place, space and power (Gaventa, 2005,

p.11). Then I discuss the reason why communities need space for action, why they need to be structures that empower local action. At the bottom line I argue that unjust and inequitable social, political and economic systems can only be reformed by the underdogs. Within this paradigm, communities, including community-based co-operatives, have a crucial role to play in the quest for social justice. In this discussion I resort to Paulo Freire, Amartya Sen and Lorenzo Milani to argue that social justice is not only an aim but also a process that can only be put in place and sustained by those who are suffering injustice, and that this process starts at the point that the oppressed or exploited become conscious of their situation as oppressed or exploited.

It is not a coincidence that Freire and Sen come from the global south while Milani was born in a privileged family but committed what Freire would call 'cultural suicide' in order to live among the excluded and exploited on the mountain sides outside Italy's cultural capital, Florence. Finally, I discuss the quest for social justice in relation to the overarching concept of hegemony. I discuss hegemony first by quoting Antonio Gramsci, mainly to explain hegemony as a set of subtle manoeuvres by the ruling classes in order to win consent among the masses for an unjust social, political and economic order. I explain it as the ability of the privileged ones to win over the consent of the exploited for a system of which they are actually the victims.

Finally I resort to Raymond Williams to explore how hegemony is never total and how communities can be those grey areas which hegemony fails to control or even grasp and thus become spaces of possibility. I particularly discuss the term 'emergent' which Williams defines as an anti-hegemonic cultural development. Within the emergent Williams outlines the presence of 'structures of feeling', that is, anti-hegemonic developing modes of thinking, of analysing what is going on in the world, creative and innovative non-conformist value systems that can help to reshape dominant world views. I contend that communities, including community-based co-operatives, can occupy space at the fringes of hegemony, possibly outside the grasp of the dominant. Here they can cultivate their potential to create spaces where structures of feeling can develop and gain momentum as people within those communities strive to gain legitimacy for their divergent world views that are more in unison with their quest for social justice across local and national boundaries.

2.2   What is community?

'Community' is a key but possibly elusive term that permeates the chapters of this research. It is thus pertinent to discuss the different shades of meaning which its connotations suggest at this point. 'Community' tends to be used and abused in different ways in order to invoke positive meanings of togetherness, of people coming together to share values, dreams, goals and endeavours. Indeed, tracing the historical development of the term 'community' from the 14th century onwards, in *Keywords*, Williams (1985) concludes that what probably brings the different meanings of 'community' together is that it

> can be the warmly persuasive word to describe an existing set of relationships, or the warmly persuasive word to describe an alternative set of relationships. What is most important, perhaps, is that unlike all other terms of social organization (state, nation, society, etc.) it seems never to be used unfavourably, and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term (Williams, 1985, p.76).

Shaw (2003, p.6) on the other hand helps us to problematize the term and draws attention to the fact that notwithstanding this positive aura around the term, speaking of community must inevitably also conjure up references to "the boundaries and the discriminations they signify – between who is 'in' and who is 'out'" (Shaw, 2003, p.6). In the case of this research, the delineations are somewhat blurred as I move between the Maltese co-operative community, the community of Maltese farmers, the community of Mġarr farmers and the residential community of Manikata. Researcher and interviewees orbit within and between these communities as employees, committee members or volunteers. Indeed, community and co-operative also invoke issues of multiple identities. Interviewees could be leaders in one community, followers in another; vociferous in one and silent in another. What brings all these nuances together is a sense of proximity to people's lives, a possibility to step out of anonymity associated with wider and higher levels of social, political and economic organisation, as well as the political possibility to work for social justice from the bottom up,

> actively look[ing] for opportunities to turn private troubles into public issues rather than what is increasingly the reverse (how quickly employment has become 'employability'; health inequalities, 'lifestyle choices'!) (Shaw, 2008, p.13).

Communities and their co-operatives become the location, the junction between place and space (Gaventa, 2005, p.11), where individual and collective identities are formed

in struggle, where individuals and groups grow and learn as they engage with loci of power and with cultural politics within and outside their communities as part of their endeavours to make their voice heard, their interests safeguarded, their livelihoods protected, and their dreams given hope.

2.3   Communities as voluntary social formations

I tend to agree with the voluntarism of John Dewey (1958) when he argues that social formations such as communities are not a natural phenomenon but the result of the will of those who participate in them. Arguing from a North American perspective he asserts,

> A good state exists not by nature but by the contriving activities of individual selves on behalf of the satisfaction of their needs. It implies art, not nature; a clear perception by individuals of what they want and of the conditions through which their wants can be satisfied (Dewey, 1958, p.217).

Arguing from the same voluntaristic platform but zooming in upon the relationships between the members of a group Dewey (1997) argues that

> The parts of a machine work together with a maximum of cooperativeness for a common result, but they do not form a community. If, however, they were all cognizant of the common end and all interested in it so that they regulated their specific activity in view of it, they would form a community (Dewey, 1997, p.5).

Thus, a community is not held together by any mechanistic will on the part of individuals to co-operate. Rather, it is held together by the will of those who want to be part of it because they see it as useful and meaningful. It is brought and held together by people who share common aims, are involved in influencing the changing and contested formulation of those aims, and have an interest in the way shared needs and aims are pursued. In their turn, members of a community will learn from and thus also be influenced by their own participation in shared pursuits.

Communities can be both inclusive and exclusive (Dewey, 1997, p.84; Shaw, 2003, p.6-7). Being voluntaristic, some might want to join in but are left out because the gate keepers fear that they might put internal power balances or the very core values that cement the collective together into peril. Others will be in but would see that the collectively pursued aims have veered towards a course with which they no longer identify themselves and thus would want to leave. Community is an organisational

space where the personal and the collective are in a dialectical relationship, influencing and shaping each other. It is a shifting terrain of negotiated identities.

But a community does not occur in a vacuum; it also engages with the surrounding environment. The relationship between the community and its external ambience is not very different from the internal dynamics between individuals and the collective. Borrowing from Williams and extrapolating from Dewey's voluntaristic view of human co-operation in communities, I contend that communities do not respond to changes in the surrounding environment in fixed pre-determined ways. Certain changes in the surrounding environment, the economic, political and social climate of an age, have a direct bearing on what goes on inside the community and entice a response. In this sense, the environment and its influence on the community is a given, but the reaction of the community to the changes occurring in the environment depend wholly on the decisions taken within the collective. Williams agrees with Freire (Freire, 2001, p.54) when in *Keywords* (Williams, 1985, p.101) he argues against a positivistic strand in Marxism which explains human agency in terms of the general laws of history, where everything is *determined* by the developments in the predictable relationship between the economic structure and civil society. Elsewhere he quotes Engels to argue that while the economic scenario delineates certain boundaries for agency, at the bottom line, "we make our history ourselves" (Williams, 1977, p.85). Socio-economic processes exert pressures on individuals and groups, prompting actions that are different from anything that happened before. They do not simply circumscribe human agency but are also "determinants within which or in relation to which [...] men (sic) act to make their own history" (Williams, 1985, p.101). The contrary is also true. That is, through their creative ways of engaging with the social, political and economic environment, communities manage to bring about changes in the wider picture, not only on the inside. To put it in Williams' Marxist terms, the economic base and superstructure circumscribe human action but are also changed by it (Williams, 1977, p.82).

Within this paradigm a co-operative community can be seen as a living organisation that is managed by its own members who are aware of what brings them together in their engagement with the wider scenarios that impinge upon their lives. As living communities, they are made up of members who are consciously inside the collective because they can identify themselves with its core values, with its aims, with its ways of dealing with issues of common interest. Co-operatives become laboratories

where people share and implement ideas on how to produce, create, consume, interact, live and grow, by participating in shared endeavours over which they have a certain level of control. What goes on inside is in some way triggered by what is going on in the wider world. Many times, a co-operative is a community that is seeking to build on its internal strengths to respond to what is going on in the wider world that is affecting the well-being of individuals and groups within the co-operative community. The external dynamics may develop outside of the co-operative community's control, but the way the co-operative responds to them is mainly within the realm of its internal participatory or, at times, exclusive mechanisms. The community thus recreates itself in the very act of engaging creatively with the exterior. In the final instant, the way the co-operative community responds to external pressures will bring about changes not only at the individual and collective level within the community, but also in the surrounding social, economic and political environment.

2.4 The very process of living together educates: the democratic community as a creative and participative learning laboratory

A creative internal response to external pressures demands particular conditions within the community. Being conscious of shared aims and being disposed to influence and to be influenced in return is not enough. Resorting again to John Dewey I believe that there has to be a third element, that is, openness of communication, both within the community and also between the community and the surrounding environment, both at the personal and at the collective level. In order to offer creative collective responses to what is going on in the wider world, communities need to create internal spaces where participants can share concerns, ideas, strategies and plans and also partake in the implementation of actions. A community challenges its own creative capacity as a group by communicating and engaging with other groups within the wider environment. It also finds strength in enabling its members to communicate not only within the community but also outside of it (Dewey, 1997, p.83. See also Sen, 2001, p.30). This free and open communication at individual and collective level, within and outwith the community, becomes a process of challenging limits of thought and action. In the final instant it becomes essentially a process of learning or, as Dewey would argue, growth. Kenneth Wain (2004) sums up this Deweyan perspective by arguing that Dewey thought in terms of

dynamic democratic communities marked by open and unrestricted communication of all kinds, both internally and between different communities. Growing as an active citizen capable of experimenting and managing change and risk intelligently or creatively in a communicative environment of this sort is what Dewey understood as education and as self-fulfilment (Wain, 2004, p.215).

In this perspective, the very fact of being a living and vibrant part of a social group entails learning and growth at the personal and at the community level. In Dewey's own words, "not only does social life demand teaching and learning for its own permanence, but the very process of living together educates" (Dewey, 1997, p.6). The co-operative community, right from its inception in the early part of the nineteenth century, was conceptualised to be a very similar community to that envisaged by Dewey. William King (in Mercer, 1922), a father figure of the co-operative movement, uses strikingly very similar language to describe co-operatives as democratic spaces where internal and external communication breeds learning at individual and collective level. Writing in a journal he himself financed and published for communication, dissemination and didactic purposes he explains:

> Co-operation cannot proceed without intelligence. The moment men, even workmen, assemble, to consider how their affairs can be best managed, as a matter of business, their minds receive a new impulse, new ideas, new motives, new objects. They are obliged to exercise their judgment, to weigh and balance probabilities—to count the profit and loss—and to acquire a knowledge of human character. These are the same qualities which are called into exercise in the highest situations in society. They may differ in degree, but do not differ in kind. While a person merely works for wages, he has only to obey orders and put forth his physical strength—or to understand and direct a machine: but whoever undertakes to manage any business, however small, must call into use, all the powers of his mind—must begin to use judgment, discretion, and invention—and must, accordingly, cultivate these qualities in exact proportion to the extent of his concerns (The Co-operator, Issue no. 21, January 1, 1830, in Mercer, 1922, p.83).

But what does really make a community a learning collective? And how does the dynamic between individual and collective learning processes works? While exploring the nature of the educative community, Dewey (1897) speaks about the individual and the community as two inseparable elements of one continuum. Within these terms he speaks of education and learning as social processes. In his words,

> this conception has due regard for both the individualistic and socialistic ideals. It is duly individual because it recognizes the formation of a certain character as the only genuine basis of right living. It is socialistic because it recognizes that this right character is not to be formed by merely individual precept, example,

or exhortation, but rather by the influence of a certain form of institutional or community life upon the individual (Dewey, 1897, no pagination).

Within this paradigm, a learning community is made up of people who, notwithstanding their diversity, come together to pursue common interests, going beyond their diversity in order to participate in a venture where everybody's actions have an impact on the actions of others. The greater the variety of interaction between individuals and the greater the embrace of diversity within the group, the more is the variety of stimuli that foster individual growth. On the other hand, the freedom enjoyed by the members of the community to act together secures a sense of agency, of collective power. It also secures a sense of structure because every participant has to evaluate her or his actions in relation to the actions of others within that community. By enticing individuals to participate in collective endeavours, a learning community experiences growth at the collective and individual level. Consequently, unbridled personal growth can only occur when individuals participate in communities which stimulate the individual to think and to act, 'liberating' her or his potential.

Seen this way, a co-operative depends upon the actions of individuals who come together to pursue goals that are an expression of the common good within the group. Individual members grow (i.e. are educated, if education is seen in Deweyan terms as growth, or liberation of potential) by actively involving themselves in the co-operative community and its ventures. The two case studies in this research will explore how individuals with different characteristics have been enticed and given space to participate in collective endeavours that enabled both the co-operative and the individuals to grow and to learn. Dewey contends that similar learning processes can only occur in democratic communities. Kenneth Wain (2004) argues that

> Dewey indicated democracy as the appropriate environment for growth, for the classroom, school, and, eventually, the learning society, and that this description of a desirable environment for growth gave his account of education a normative dimension. So that the whole question of education from a Deweyan point of view reduces to one of providing, or struggling for, a democratic society that would have the same sort of features, roughly, as Habermas's and Ranson's learning democracy based on the communicative action of citizens in the public sphere through the formation of publics (Wain, 2004, p.215).

What endears me most to Dewey is the way he manages to equate learning processes with education and democracy. He offers a paradigm in which democracy becomes the space where all human beings can be equal and where no prejudices stand in the way

of anybody's claim for human fulfilment. It is a paradigm which lays out a model for living together in a way that every person can give and take, can learn and teach, can grow and enable others to reach human fulfilment. In his book *Democracy and Education* (Dewey, 1997) he sums up all this in one paragraph:

> A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own, is equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity. These more numerous and more varied points of contact denote a greater diversity of stimuli to which an individual has to respond; they consequently put a premium on variation in his action. They secure a liberation of powers which remain suppressed as long as the incitations to action are partial, as they must be in a group which in its exclusiveness shuts out many interests (Dewey, 1997, p.87).

Within this framework, Dewey's epistemological stance becomes one which situates the creation of knowledge at the interconnection between the individual and the social networks in which he or she is actively involved. 'Knowledge' becomes the process whereby people are socialised into the assumptions which the social group takes for granted. On the other hand, 'thinking' is the process in which knowledge is made the object of inquiry. Thinking is therefore a "critical process" in which "true knowledge is revised and extended, and our convictions as to the state of things reorganized" (Dewey, 1997, p.295). This brings us back to the understanding of democracy, since knowledge can only be created when people are free to ask, to view things from a critical lens, when they let others offer them new and different viewpoints on things they have long taken for granted, when different people with different ways of seeing the world can communicate freely their world views to each other, challenging each other's assumptions in the process. Moss and Normore (2006) would call this important characteristic of a Deweyan inspired community, the "freedom of intelligence" (Moss and Normore, 2006, p.84).

A final inspiration from Dewey comes with the question: but what do people challenge each other about? What are the ideas they communicate to each other all about? Crucial is the fact that what is under the lens, what spurs people to engage in communicating ideas, is real-life situations, people's everyday concerns, their hopes and fears as they engage with daily life in search of meaning. Learning for Dewey is thus a pragmatic activity, embedded in the process of engaging with real-life situations.

As Saltmarsh (1996) argues, the member of the democratic community "engages in the world and brings meaning into existence," becoming "an explorer, maker, creator" (Saltmarsh, 1996, p.15-16). This Deweyan paradigm is a very intriguing way of analysing what goes on inside co-operatives. Their very origin lies in people's search for meaning as they grappled with the sweeping effects of early industrial capitalism on their everyday lives, creating potentially democratic and participatory social spaces where they could engage with the world and learn in the process as they communicated with each other with regards to different ways of how to deal with real-life issues.

Like Dewey, Williams (2001) argues that the creative process of self-creation and growth can only be guaranteed in a democratic community that has all the qualities identified by the American philosopher. However, his views are helpful in problematizing the notion of democratic communities. Like Shaw (2003, p.6) he points out to situations where communities are not democratic, arguing that,

> If man is essentially a learning, creating and communicating being, the only social organization adequate to his nature is a participating democracy, in which all of us, as unique individuals, learn, communicate and control. Any lesser, restrictive system is simply wasteful of our true resources; in wasting individuals, by shutting them out from effective participation, it is damaging our true common process (Williams, 2001, p.118).

As a matter of fact, what is perhaps missing from Dewey's paradigm is one basic question: What if the processes inside the community are not democratic at all? Or, which is an extension of the same question; what if the political climate surrounding the community where one lives and works precluded that community from being a democratic community? I would here resort to Freire who, writing from a South American perspective, had experienced these realities first hand.

Echoing Dewey, Freire (1998) writes about the dialectical relationship between the individual and society asserting that "the two come together as unfinished products in a permanent relationship" (Freire, 1998, p.147). Central to his pedagogy is man's and woman's state of 'unfinishedness', grounded in an existential philosophy of a being that is constantly in relation to itself in search of permanent fulfilment. Within this paradigm the human being is not only a 'being' but also a constant 'becoming' (Freire, 1990, p.56-57). However, the Brazilian educator gives a new dimension to the notion of growth. Expanding on the issue against the background of the oppressive situations in South America in the late sixties and seventies, he argues that 'unfinishedness' is dependent on the collective struggle for freedom from oppression. Just as in Dewey, for

Freire freedom is both an aim in itself but also an aim in so far as it is a prerogative for learning, growth and human fulfilment. If this freedom does not exist, it is those who are robbed of their freedom who have the onus but also the possibility to work towards obtaining that freedom. In an apparent aporia, participants in the community strive to acquire enough freedom in order to work for ever more freedom, learning and fulfilling themselves in the process. The Indian economist Amartya Sen (2001) describes this dual role of freedom as the "constitutive" and the "instrumental" role of freedom. According to Sen, the merits of democracy lie in the fact that it ensures freedom as an end in itself, what he calls, a "constitutive role", and it also ensures freedom in its "instrumental role", that is, in its ability to make people always more capable of securing greater degrees of freedom and development (Sen, 2001, p.36). The same happens for the pragmatic function of communication (Dewey) or dialogue (Freire) since according to Sen, "Not only is the force of public discussion one of the correlates of democracy, with an extensive reach, but its cultivation can also make democracy itself function better" (Sen, 2001, p.157).

As Sen explains, the process might look as a circular, self-enriching process of community development. But where does it start? Are there any critical moments in the process? I find that Freire (1990) lays out the process in a more sequential manner when he writes that

> The pedagogy of the oppressed, as a humanist and libertarian pedagogy, has two distinct stages. In the first, the oppressed unveil the world of oppression and through the praxis commit themselves to its transformation. In the second stage, in which the reality of oppression has already been transformed, this pedagogy ceases to belong to the oppressed and becomes a pedagogy of all men in the process of permanent liberation (Freire, 1990, p.31)[1].

The initial spark that sets the process in motion is perhaps the most intriguing moment. Why would a group of working class people in the town of Rochdale decide to do something about their difficult situation by setting up a small co-operative? Why would a group of people in the small village of Manikata decide to set up a local action group in order to avert an environmental disaster in their locality? Why would a group of farmers in the village of Mġarr take up the proposal by the authorities to set up a co-operative and come together to get a more decent pay for their agricultural produce? Somewhere, at some point in time, somebody decided it was time to act and felt

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[1] The quotations taken from Freire's earlier works contain an andro-centric discourse. Later works avoid such language and respond to the feminist critique of his earlier publications.

responsible but also empowered enough to get together with others to take collective action. In total agreement with Williams (1985, p.101) and Dewey (1958, p.217) on the issue of voluntarism, Freire points out that

> I could not be absent from the construction of my own presence. I cannot perceive myself as a presence in the world and at the same time explain it as a result of forces completely alien to me (Freire, 2001, p.55).

Against this background he explains the initial spark that sets the liberation process in motion as the moment when one becomes conscious of his or her condition of oppression, that things could be different, that a different world is possible. Challenged by 'limit situations' (Freire, 1990, p.71), the self either resigns itself fatalistically, as if oppression and despair were "the immutable will of God" (Freire, 2001, p.75), or else recognises itself as the seat of power where decisions regarding the self are taken. In Freire's words,

> In our making and remaking of ourselves in the process of making history – as subjects and objects, persons, becoming beings of insertion in the world and not of pure adaptation to the world – we should end by having the *dream*, too, a mover of history. There is no change without dream, as there is no dream without hope (Freire, 1994, p.90-91).

In this sense, the real life situation, the problem which the community comes together to engage with is not an insurmountable stumbling block but a 'limit situation', something which needs to be discussed, challenged by challenging the community's own ability to think, evaluate, communicate and act. At first sight, dialogue in Freire assumes very similar connotations to Dewey's communication. It is a romanticised wilful act of (self) creation. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1990) he asserts that

> If it is in speaking their word that men transform the world by naming it, dialogue imposes itself as the way in which men achieve significance as men. Dialogue is thus an existential necessity (Freire, 1990, p.61).

But at the same time it is a politically loaded term that denotes the taking of positions, the rolling up of sleeves in order to pass from word to action, back to word and back again to action in the cyclical process of praxis. Dialogue becomes "the loving encounter of people, who, mediated by the world, 'proclaim' that world. They transform the world and in transforming it, humanize it for all people" (Freire, 1998, p.115).

One last argument I would like to expand upon with regards to Dewey's paradigm of democratic learning communities is the learning process as a pragmatic,

creative, epistemological process which occurs at the point where communication and dialogue intersect with daily life issues, providing meaning to what people do in a community. In Chapter 1 I resorted to Foley (2004) in order to point out that most adult learning is what he categorised as "informal". He describes this as a kind of learning that "occurs when people continuously try to learn from their experience. It involves individual or group reflection and discussion, but does not involve formal instruction" (Foley, 2004, p.4-5). I contend that potentially this could be a major difference between the learning that goes on in investor owned companies and the learning that goes on in co-operatives. Being mostly participative communities, co-ops are much better placed to foster internal dialogue and participative decision making processes. I find that Wenger (1998) takes this discourse to a different level in his analysis of learning as a social phenomenon within the Deweyan tradition. In his seminal book *Communities of Practice* he focuses on the interconnectedness between participation and learning, considering learning to be "a fundamental social phenomenon, reflecting our own deeply social nature as human beings capable of knowing" (Wenger, 1998, p.3). Our social engagement occurs through our participation in what Wenger calls 'Communities of Practice', that is, communities where people not only act together but also feel that they belong. People act together in a community because they feel that the group in which they are active gives them a sense of identity and also gives meaning to what they do (Wenger, 1998, p.4-5). He particularly qualifies 'participation' to refer

> not just to local events of engagement in certain activities with certain people, but to a more encompassing process of being active participants in the *practices* of social communities and constructing *identities* in relation to these communities [...] Such participation shapes not only what we do, but also who we are and how we interpret what we do (Wenger, 1998, p.4).

As Fenwick and Tennant (2008) put it, in Wenger's framework "knowing is interminably inventive and entwined with doing. The objective is to become a full participant in the community of practice, not to *learn* about the practice" (Fenwick and Tennant, 2008, p.63).

The search for meaning and the process of constructing identities is mediated by our participation in communities of practice where we share in enterprises which we value. In this sense we also find meaning and construct identities through non-participation in communities we do not identify with (Wenger, 1998, p.164-167). Within this perspective, communities of practice become what Wenger calls "shared

histories of learning" (Wenger, 1998, p.86) since in these communities members are initiated into reified processes. This means that members learn how to participate, are influenced by other people's participation, and influence others through their participation in the process of negotiating shared forms and meanings that have been developing over time. These shared forms and meanings are both born in shared experience and give shape to it. The history of the development of the reification process within our different communities of practice, and the history of our participation (or non-participation) in it, define our history of learning in our quest for meaning and identity (Wenger, 1998, p.59, 89).

Using Wenger's analysis, I would argue that co-operative communities are formed around shared concerns and take shape through participatory action where people find it worthwhile to give time and energy to discuss, analyse and take action around those shared concerns. Participants identify with the practical knowledge creating processes going on inside the co-operative community. Co-operatives, then, have all the statutory potential to become creative learning spaces where individual and collective identities take shape in struggle or praxis. The level of democracy within them is measured by the level of effective communication within the co-operative and also between the co-operative and the wider community. An effective co-operative thrives on a participative creative process of reflection, action, analysis, hypothesizing and further action. Co-operatives as communities of practice are also spaces for the creation of identities as individuals orbit between spaces within and outside co-ops, participating in knowledge creating endeavours that have a bearing on the developing reified structures within and outside the groups as well as on the lives of participating individuals.

2.5   Creating elbow room for democratic communities: place and space, structure and agency

Co-operatives in the United Kingdom have been instrumental in facilitating people's participation in bottom-up economic development (Carreiro, 2009, p.2-3). But this space for grassroots action was created within a laissez-faire economic discourse that favoured the proliferation of industry and private capital investment and viewed any non-conformist community-based economic units as a threat to dominant political and economic structures. Evolving from within the wider labour movement in Britain, co-

operatives contributed to the movement's struggle for more democracy and benefited from the struggle itself. On the contrary, in post-war Malta co-operatives started off as a top-down movement promoted by the colonial authorities. However, the way democracy developed on the island enabled some co-operatives to become a voice for farmers and rural communities. In turn, the struggles put up by co-operatives to make the voice of rural communities heard helped to further develop and open up the national democratic system. But how do communities, or specifically community-based co-operatives, manage to achieve their aims in a wider environment that may be hostile to bottom-up initiatives that challenge mainstream social, political and economic discourse and widely held tenets?

Shaw (2007) speaks of this process in terms of the dialectical relationship between 'agency' and 'structure' in a way that

> action is always mediated through relations of power; autonomy always constrained by the dialectics of control [...] a shifting and dynamic terrain, that generates both opportunities and constraints (Shaw, 2007, p.27).

Shaw and Martin describe agency as "the capacity of the subject to act autonomously" (Shaw and Martin, 2000, p.403), while Sen (2001) speaks of 'agency' in terms of the 'agent', that is,

> someone who acts and brings about change, and whose achievements can be judged in terms of her own values and objectives, whether or not we assess them in terms of some external criteria as well (Sen, 2001, p.19).

Within Sen's framework for human development people's capabilities are safeguarded within structures that guarantee individual freedom. In Sen's words,

> What people can positively achieve is influenced by economic opportunities, political liberties, social powers, and the enabling conditions of good health, basic education, and the encouragement and cultivation of initiatives (Sen, 2001, p.5).

Anything that hinders a person's capability or agency is 'unfreedom'. He argues that

> Development requires the removal of major sources of unfreedom: poverty as well as tyranny, poor economic opportunities as well as systematic social deprivation, neglect of public facilities as well as intolerance or overactivity of repressive states (Sen, 2001, p.3).

Although Sen is writing from a Southern perspective, his paradigm is equally relevant to analyse the situation of democratic bottom-up citizen engagement in the affluent North. Unsurprisingly, Gaventa (2011) argues that in many Western democracies the relationship between citizens and their governments is being

progressively marked by disillusionment. Consequently there is the need to strengthen "the processes of citizen participation" which he qualifies as

> the ways in which poor people exercise voice through new forms of inclusion, consultation and/or mobilization designed to inform and to influence larger institutions and policies (Gaventa, 2011, p.255).

Gaventa's analysis enriches the analysis of the possibilities of the conceptual tool of 'community' by giving it relevance in the contemporary context of seemingly tired and detached Western democratic governing institutions. In a very schematic way Gaventa analyses communities and citizen participation in terms of place, space and power, using a three-dimensional analytical framework which he calls the 'power cube'. This could be very useful to analyse actual community action (or the lack of it), that is happening on the ground. It is also useful to inform planning for effective participation of individuals in communities and of communities within a wider scenario. This is more so in the frequent instances where the wider scenario is hostile to anything that would rock the political and economic boat too much, especially if the disturbing agent advances from unprecedented quarters that might elude official channels that usually control public opinion, public attitudes and most of all, public action.

Figure 4. John Gaventa's Power Cube for the analysis of power relations
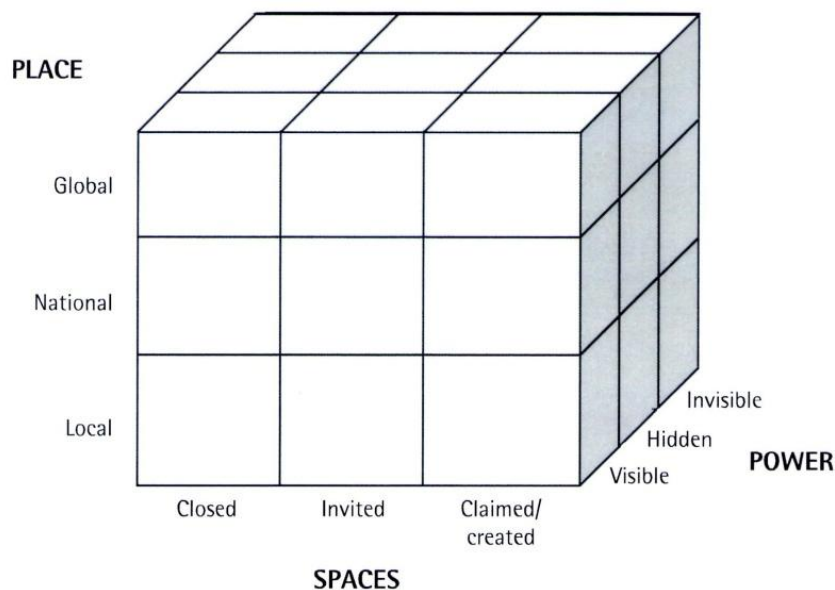
Gaventa, 2005, p.11

Gaventa analyses spaces by asking "how they were created, and with whose interests and what terms of engagement" (Gaventa, 2005, p.12). The power cube suggests a continuum that goes from 'closed', to 'invited', to 'claimed' or 'created spaces'. 'Closed spaces' are situations where "decisions are made by a set of actors behind closed doors, without any pretence of broadening the boundaries for inclusion."   Gaventa (2005) quotes Andrea Cornwall to describe 'invited spaces' as

> those in which people (as users, citizens or beneficiaries) are invited to participate by various kinds of authorities, be they government, supranational agencies or non-governmental organisations (Gaventa, 2005, p.12).

Finally there are 'claimed or created spaces' that "are claimed by less powerful actors from or against power holders, or created more autonomously by them." These

> range from ones created by social movements and community associations, to those simply involving natural places where people gather to debate, discuss and resist, outside of the institutionalised policy arenas (Gaventa, 2005, p.12).

> On the 'place' axis, the continuum goes from local to global. Gaventa argues that

these dimensions

> are increasingly interrelated. Local forms and manifestations of power are constantly being shaped in relationship to global actors and forces, and in turn, local action affects and shapes global power (Gaventa, 2006, p.28).

This is very interesting to the notion of communities and community-based co-operatives that many times, as shown further below in this research, find themselves with their feet firmly grounded in local realities but whose remit becomes that of enabling local communities to engage with global issues. Often, the global issues are the very reason why communities come together to further analyse local situations, to propose actions, to act and to work for change at the local level and possibly at the national and global levels.

When analysing the third dimension, Gaventa (2006) speaks of 'visible', 'hidden' and 'invisible power'. Visible power is the easiest to describe, since it has to do with a manifestation of power embedded in "formal rules, structures, authorities, institutions and procedures of decision making." 'Hidden power' has to do with the way "Certain powerful people and institutions maintain their influence by controlling who gets to the decision-making table and what gets on the agenda" (Gaventa, 2006, p.29). The third dimension is the hardest to define and locate. It is very akin to the notion of hegemony as 'ruling by consent'. As Gaventa describes it,

power, in its more insidious forms, may be internalised in terms of one's values, self-esteem and identities, such that voices in visible places are but echoes of what the power holders who shaped those places want to hear (Gaventa, 2006, p.29).

In this respect communities that are best placed to bring about change in people's lives are those that are able to make people aware of hidden forms of power, what Freire (1990) calls 'conscientisation', in order to liberate their internal communicative processes from unconsciously self-induced censorship, or what Freire calls 'the internalisation of the oppressor' (Freire, 1990, p.22).

Gaventa (2005) cautions users of the power cube approach for a number of factors. People move from one community of practice to another during the day, and so they may also be "relatively powerless in one setting" but "may be more powerful in others" (Gaventa, 2005, p.27). This means that the power cube as an analytical tool is best used in very concrete settings. A second factor is that when individuals or organisations are using the power cube model they have to factor themselves into the equation, not only because they are part of the setting which is being analysed, but also because being in a position to analyse power relations in a particular setting contributes to the construction of power relations in that same setting (Gaventa, 2005, p.27). In this respect the power-cube would be useful to analyse not only the power relationship between a community-based co-operative and the surrounding political and economic environment in which it orbits and struggles, but also the power relationships within the co-operative community itself. It is a community governed by its own internal developing reified governing structures that, as Shaw (2003, p.6) argued, may include some and shut out others, empower certain voices and silence others, career collective action in a certain direction to address the needs of some and ignore the needs of others within the community.

The models proposed by Dewey, Freire, Wenger and Gaventa are all useful to unpack the romantic notions around communities described by Williams at the beginning of this chapter. In a co-operative the management committee is always in danger of turning itself into an exclusive caste. A co-operative that allows free internal communication and participation promotes learning at individual and at collective level. A co-operative that stifles communication and participation turns the democratically elected management committee into an oppressive privileged group, and the creative process of 'culture', 'growth' or 'constant becoming' is shackled. An elected management committee kept on its guard by a watchful and participative

membership base is constantly engaged with issues concerning the wider membership and does not turn itself into a 'sterile elite' (Dewey, 1997, p.84). Looking outside of the co-operative boundary walls, a state that fosters and promotes different models of economic development, including the community based co-operative model, is not only democratic, but promotes the historical process of democratic development as it constantly unravels itself. A democratic nation state needs to create spaces for dissenting voices. When it doesn't, it is up to those being short-changed by the system to create those spaces. Co-operatives have often been on the forefront of this struggle. In England they struggled to have industrial and commercial laws changed so that space could be created for co-operatives to function within the wider economic scenario. In the case of Malta, co-operatives have been at the fore-front of promoting alternative worker-owned businesses mainly in services industries, to promote alternative global economic relationships through fair-trade, and to give a voice to farmers' concerns as they struggle with the effects of globalisation.

2.6 The social justice model of community: the struggle for equity across boundaries

Co-operatives were set up in England in the early 19th century by pioneering individuals with a high sense of social justice. They aimed to combat the dark side of the industrial revolution through a paradigm shift in industrial organisation, from one based on the maximisation of profits to one that was concerned with the wellbeing of the members of a collective. It was a movement that was well aware of the social and political implications of taking certain actions at community level. Their rationale ran contrary to the dominating capitalist ideology of the time that was turning England into a richer country but also widening the divide between rich and poor, between oppressors and oppressed, between exploiters and exploited. The move towards the creation of co-operatives was an overt claim for social justice based on community-based mutual help.

McLaren (1989) states that Marxist critics have often slated Dewey, arguing that his "faith in creative intelligence is eminently naïve, because he underestimates the powerful social, political, and economic forces that mediate against equality and justice." However, McLaren goes on to argue that Dewey "was unwavering in his support for the ideology of democracy as both an historical construction and a referent for dignifying politics, human efficiency, and social struggle" (McLaren, 1989, p.198,

199). Saltmarsh (1996) highlights Dewey's commitment to the ideals of equity and social justice and how these are at the very base of the democratic learning community where the growth of every individual is perceived as an individual right but also as a necessity for communal development. He argues that Dewey

> offered a justice orientation which "looks at the well-being of society as a whole," "realizes the interdependence of interests," is "fixed upon positive opportunities for growth," and is "centered on social rights and possibilities" (1908, p.349). This he contrasted with a "charity" perspective that "assumes a superior and inferior class," is "negative and palliative merely," and that treats "individuals as separate, to whom, in their separateness, good is to be done" (1908, p. 349). "Charity," wrote Dewey, "may even be used as a sop to one's conscience while at the same time it buys off the resentment which might otherwise grow up in those who suffer from social injustice" (1932b, p. 301). (Saltmarsh, 1996, p.17)

Similarly Freire (1990) argues that poverty is not averted through charity but by working to bring about the needed structural changes in the political and economic setup to eliminate the cause of poverty itself. Charity merely

> constrains the fearful and the subdued, the 'rejects of life', to extend their trembling hands. Real generosity lies in striving so that those hands – whether of individuals or entire peoples – need to be extended less and less in supplication, so that more and more they become human hands which work, and by working, transform the world (Freire, 1990, p.21-22).

As already argued above, conscientization is a crucial moment. The time the poor, the oppressed, those short changed by the current political and economic structures become aware that they are the victims and that they can do something about it is also the moment they realise that they can get together to engage with the situation and change it. As Freire (1998) argued, the oppressed initiate the process of freedom when they are placed "in consciously critical confrontation with their problems, to make them the agents of their own recuperation" (Freire, 1998, p.16). This is how many community-based co-operatives were born in the first half of the nineteenth century in England. While working together the process of conscientization becomes part of the praxis itself. Sen (2001) argues that the people's right to be free and thus capable of leading the kind of life they value, cannot be conferred by some privileged ones on others, but stems from a process of a liberation of energy and potential at individual and at group level where

> With adequate social opportunities, individuals can effectively shape their own destiny and help each other. They need not be seen primarily as passive

recipients of the benefits of cunning development programs. There is indeed a strong rationale for recognizing the positive role of free and sustainable agency – and even of constructive impatience (Sen, 2001, p.11).

In the small community at Barbiana, Milani and his students read the newspapers every afternoon, with the intention of learning Italian but also to learn how to read the world in the Freirean sense. This was the time when, discussing the etymology of words the pupils would discuss issues concerning workers' rights, the political system in Italy, the causes of poverty, the rationale behind international wars, or the right not to obey the law. It was in itself a praxis that expressed itself in the publication of two books. In one of them the boys at Barbiana argued that through living and learning together they realized it was time for them to claim that "We are sovereign. It's no longer time for begging, but for choices. Against the classists that you are, against hunger, illiteracy, racism, the colonial wars" (Borg, Cardona and Caruana, 2009, p.109). Thus, not only are some communities brought together over issues of social justice, but working together the process of conscientization develops in line with their developing sense of empowerment.

I would also contend that formal education for all has an essential and crucial role to play in providing the oppressed, the exploited, or those who have to grapple with local effects of adverse global processes to get to the point of becoming conscious of their situation, to realise that they are the ones who should do something about their situation and that they have the cognitive tools to struggle at the individual and at the collective level to eradicate oppression, exploitation and helplessness. Milani (1997) strongly argued that,

> The world must be reformed by the poor. And they will only rectify it when they would have been able to judge it and condemn it with an open and alert mind which can only be found in a poor person who has been to school (translated from Milani, 1997, p.105).

People who lack the skills to read and write, to analyse effectively, to know where to look for information, to know how to organise themselves effectively at the collective level, all suffer from what Sen would call 'capability deprivation' (Sen, 2001, p.131). Societies and nation states thus owe their people a quality education that offers them the basic cognitive tools that empower them to become agents of their own freedom and humanisation. In the end, education has the constitutive characteristic of enabling people to fulfil their ethical obligation of being responsible for their own and for other people's human fulfilment.

The social justice model of community is intimately linked to the notion of responsibility. Freire argues that when people are robbed of their agency and are made the objects of charity they become the recipients of what he called 'assistencialism', which highlights the bigotry in the act. It also "robs people of a fundamental human necessity – responsibility" (Freire, 1998, p.16). In very similar terms Sen (2001) argues that those robbed of their right to freedom are also robbed of their "ability to lead responsible lives, which are contingent on having certain basic freedoms. Responsibility requires freedom" (Sen, 2001, p.284). Responsibility is also a collective issue since

> the capabilities that a person does actually have (and not merely theoretically enjoys) depend on the nature of the social arrangements, which can be crucial for individual freedoms. And there the state and the society cannot escape responsibility (Sen, 2001, p.288).

In this sense not only individual and communal growth are inseparable (to frame the argument in Deweyan terms), but also individual and collective responsibility to secure the humanisation of all is interdependent and inseparable. At the bottom line, everybody is ethically responsible for his or her own freedom and for the freedom of others. Correspondingly, freedom has the constitutive characteristic of enabling always more people to become actual responsible agents who struggle for their own freedom and that of others. This research will explore the possibilities of the co-operative model as an ideological and organisational tool that mediates and gives shape and scope to individual and collective struggles where individuals and communities take upon themselves the responsibility for everyone's right to become more fully human, to lead a life that matches his or her aspirations for human fulfilment.

And this leads me to explore a final characteristic of the social justice model of community. The social justice model goes beyond the boundaries of nation states. Causes of injustice are very often a by-product of globalisation and local communities that bear the brunt of injustice will also be able to identify these global causes that have a negative impact on local communities. They will also get to know about other communities around the globe where similar communities are suffering from similar effects. In this sense, even the idea of the nation state is challenged because once a person or a community are committed to work towards social justice, that commitment will need to be fuelled by a sustaining value system at the base of which one will find the realisation that every human being is entitled to his or her right to become fully

human. Lorenzo Milani and his students at Barbiana arrived at this state of consciousness when in their 'Letter to the military chaplains' they wrote,

> If you have the right to divide the world into Italians and foreigners, then I tell you that in this sense I don't have a Fatherland, and I claim the right to divide the world into outcasts and oppressed on one side, and privileged and oppressors on the other. The first are my Fatherland, the others my foreigners (translated from Milani et al., no date, p.12).

Speaking in similar terms Sen agrees that an individual's right to be free is not in any way separated from other people's claim to freedom. As Sen (2001) puts it,

> As people who live – in a broad sense – together, we cannot escape the thought that the terrible occurrences that we see around us are quintessentially our problems. They are our responsibility – whether or not they are also anyone else's (Sen, 2001, p.282).

This draws us back to Lorenzo Milani's vision of a caring society where injustice is named and those suffering it are empowered to challenge it together. In *Letter to the Judges* he writes,

> On a wall in our school we have written in big letters "I care". It is the untranslatable motto of the best American youths. "It matters to me, I have the matter at heart." It is the exact opposite of the Fascist motto "I won't give a damn" (Translated from Milani et al., no date, p.34).

In *Letter to a Teacher*, then, the Barbiana student writes,

> Then, while teaching, I learnt many things. For example I learnt that the problems of others were the same as mine. Getting out of them together is politics. Getting out of them on our own is avarice (Borg, Cardona and Caruana, 2009, p.37).

In Chapter 3 I will delve into the history of co-operative development in the UK to show how the setting up of co-operatives was contagious. The initial surge in the setting up of community-based co-operatives was spearheaded by William King and sustained by an educational journal he published to educate co-operators in disseminating co-operation as a model for enabling local communities to deal with their own problems on their own terms. When a more sustainable co-operative model was developed in the town of Rochdale in 1845, the model was soon disseminated in other communities in a way that other suffering communities could use it to empower themselves with a working economic model that could help them deal with their problems collectively and sustainably. When finally the co-operative movement took off, it also felt the need to

reach out to others who saw in co-operation a viable alternative economic model that was not only community based but that could bring communities from different countries together. This was largely the motivation behind the setting up of the International Co-operative Alliance in 1893 (Birchall, 1997, p.40).

2.7   Community as possibility within hegemony: structures of feeling as an emergent counter hegemonic culture

Gramsci (2007B) analyses the relationship between the underclasses and the dominant or hegemonic and concludes that it is primarily a pedagogic one, arguing that

> a pedagogic relationship cannot be limited to relationships that are strictly "scholastic"... This relationship exists in the whole of society in its entirety and for every individual with respect to other individuals, between intellectual ranks and non-intellectuals, between rulers and ruled, between élites and followers, between leaders and followers, between avant-garde and army corps. Every relationship within "hegemony" is necessarily a pedagogic relationship [...] (translated from Gramsci, 2007b, p.1331).

The result is that the dominant and powerful impose their hegemony not by coercion but primarily by consent. In this regard civil society institutions, including but not limited to education, are "crucial in securing consent for the ruling way of life, one that is supportive of and is supported by the prevailing mode of production" (Mayo, 2010, p.22). Writing about the way hegemony is imposed in civil society to win the consent of the masses Gramsci states that

> The school as a positive educative function and the law courts as a repressive and negative educative function are the state's most important activities in this sense: but in reality there is a multiplicity of other so called private initiatives and activities which operate towards this end, which constitute the apparatus of political and cultural hegemony of the ruling classes (translated from Gramsci, 2007b, p.1049).

Gramsci (2007a) further explains this 'multiplicity' as

> everything that influences or can influence public opinion directly or indirectly... the libraries, the schools, different types of circles and clubs, up to architecture, the way streets are laid out and the names of these [...] (translated from Gramsci, 2007a, p.333).

Ledwith (2005) refers to these institutions that are meant to win the consent of society as the "subtle forces of ideological persuasion" (Ledwith, 2005, p.125). Crowther (2007) comments that

These institutions generate meanings which we use to make sense of experience. When they are internalised as 'natural' and expressed as 'common sense', the process of hegemonic control 'saturates experience' (Crowther, 2007, p.34).

This means that, from an acquiescing point of view our lives would make sense to us, it would not even cross our minds that society could be organised in a different way; we would make judgements, evaluate events, think and act as if there is no alternative to the dominant value system. The power of the forces of hegemony are further explained by Raymond Williams who uses the term 'restrictive systems' to explain how hegemony privileges some and subordinates the many others, selectively promoting certain world views and robbing others of their right to speak out. Consequently hegemony

is seen to depend for its hold not only on its expression of the interest of a ruling class but also on its acceptance as 'normal reality' or 'commonsense' by those in practice subordinated to it (Williams, 1985, p.145).

The power of hegemony is at its best when, as Morgan argues, "In class societies it serves to hide the realities of inequality and domination, or to present them as necessary and even desirable" (Morgan, 2002, p.245).

But what role do communities and grassroots initiatives such as community-based co-operatives have with regards to hegemony? Community organisations have all the negative potential to become part of the hegemonic apparatus that aims at winning the consent of the people. But harking back to the social justice model of community, communities also have the positive potential to work for conscientization, that moment when communities become conscious of their situation as oppressed, or as domesticated within a hegemonic system of social, economic and political control that favours the few over the many at local, national and global level. So, problematizing the social justice model further, we can argue that communities, including community-based co-operatives, can be social mechanisms that enable people to become conscious of the presence and reach of hegemony as an oppressive control mechanism. I would also argue that over time, as they struggle for recognition and, to use Gramsci's words, turn their own good sense into widely shared common sense, they can become domesticated, normalised, co-opted and absorbed within hegemony itself. In order to investigate further the ambivalent position of communities and community-based co-operatives in relation to hegemony I would resort to Raymond Williams, and particularly to his notion of 'structures of feeling'. I will do this

by discussing his interpretation of hegemony, its strengths and weaknesses, and the window of opportunity which the weaknesses provide for redeeming action.

Williams (1977) explains hegemony as a dynamic process which needs "continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not at all its own" (Williams, 1977, p.112) He agrees with Gramsci in that hegemony, "in the extended political and cultural sense (...) while by definition it is always dominant, it is never either total or exclusive" (Williams, 1977, p.113). This implies that hegemony has to be constantly reformulated in order to outmanoeuvre counter hegemonic forces; an unchanging hegemony would be laying the foundations for its own undoing. I find this inability of hegemony to be "either total or exclusive" to be particularly relevant to exploring further the notion of community as a vehicle towards more social justice.

Williams (1977, p.122-125) explains the dynamic interplay between hegemonic and counter hegemonic forces in terms of 'Dominant', 'Residual', and 'Emergent'. The dominant is the hegemonic. But since hegemony never manages to embody the whole of social life but produces or 'determines' specific counter hegemonic movements, then he also speaks of the 'residual' and the 'emergent'.

The 'residual' is a term Williams uses to describe certain elements found in contemporary culture which cannot be explained in terms of the dominant culture but which are nonetheless present and lived. In so far as not being incorporated into the dominant culture they can take on the nature of an oppositional force in relation to hegemony (Williams, 1977, p.122).

The 'emergent' is more difficult to explain. It implies "that new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationship are continually being created." It is a new development within the dominant culture, a new cultural element which is alternative or even oppositional to the dominant and which can only survive if it manages to avoid incorporation into the dominant. This is "made much more difficult by the fact that much incorporation looks like recognition, acknowledgement, and thus a form of acceptance" (Williams, 1977, p.123-125).

Framing the argument in different words Williams (1977) argues that there is a difference between what he calls 'practical consciousness' and 'official consciousness'. While "practical consciousness is what is actually being lived," official consciousness is a fixed analytical framework, coming in the form of fixed categories, which is promoted

by the dominant culture. Williams locates the emergent squarely within the domain of practical consciousness. It is a movement that has not yet gained wide visibility since

> It is a kind of feeling and thinking which is indeed social and material, but each in an embryonic phase before it can become fully articulate and defined exchange. Its relations with the already articulate and defined are then exceptionally complex (Williams, 1977, p.131).

He calls such processes 'structures of feeling' that have to do with "meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt." They are embryonic structures because they have not yet been reified into fixed forms (Williams, 1977, p.131-132). They are located in the interconnection between the personal and the social,

> a social experience which is still in process, often indeed not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating, but which in analysis (though rarely otherwise) has its emergent, connecting, and dominant characteristics, indeed its specific hierarchies (Williams, 1977, p.132).

Structures of feeling are thus linkages between thought and action that while determined or caused by actions occurring within dominant structures, forms and formations, they are independent of them. They are still in formation and have not yet taken on the form of a visible emergent structure though they aspire to become an emergent formation that presents itself as alternative or even oppositional to the dominant.

Linking back to the Deweyan idea of individual and collective growth within a learning community, Williams highlights the role that new generations have in fuelling the creative knowledge creating process within living communities. He asserts that

> the new generation responds in its own ways to the unique world it is inheriting, taking up many continuities, that can be traced, and reproducing many aspects of the organization, which can be separately described, yet feeling its whole life in certain ways differently, and shaping its creative response into a new structure of feeling (Williams, 2001, p.64-65).

Structures of feeling would thus encapsulate creative forms of engaging with the present. But what if this creative process that deviates from the norm is singled out as threatening? The term 'structures of feeling' grasps the struggles for legitimacy, or to borrow Freire's and Milani's metaphors, the struggle for having a word to speak and for having the right to speak it out loud. Williams shows how structures of feeling manifest themselves and can actually be grasped at the very point where they confront hegemony. He asserts that

Instead of thinking of 'society' as a single and uniform object, we look at actual groups and the relationships between them. Since these relationships can be not only those of co-operation but also of tension and conflict, the individual with his sense of particular directions finds material in the alternative directions of his society making it possible for him to express variant growth in social terms (Williams, 2001, p.101).

It is very interesting that Williams (1977) uses the term 'variant' rather than 'deviant' growth. The connotations of 'variant' are positive while those of 'deviant' are negative. Structures of feeling are variant to what is commonly held to be the canon. They are positive alternatives to a kind of growth that has fallen into a rut, doing justice to some while leaving many in the lurch. It is at this point that communities can become spaces where individuals find the necessary freedom to engage freely with wider structures of control, put them into question, and dream about alternative or oppositional scenarios to the dominant. Communities can become those secluded spots where the dominant fails to silence or is unable to totally control human experience. The dominant cannot incorporate and control the whole of human experience. There are areas which it chooses to ignore or is unable to control or even grasp. These elusive "areas of experience and practice and meaning" (Williams, 1977, p.126) are actually the areas of hope for change. These are areas where alternative and oppositional forces can find room for manoeuvre, a kind of incubator for ideas that jar with the dominant. Community can provide the right environment where these counter-dominant structures of feeling can develop from an individual thought, judgement, value system or action to a more structured, visible and concrete phenomenon that is able to challenge hegemonic modes of thinking. As soon as these emergent alternatives metamorphose from a 'pre-emergent' phase into more visible structures of feeling, the danger of incorporation into the dominant becomes very real.

The hope of a new world order lies at the crucial junction between seeking recognition as a credible alternative and resisting incorporation into the dominant under the very guise of recognition. One reason why the dominant can never encapsulate and control the whole human experience (and thus why hegemony can never be all encompassing) is that human existence in itself is a permanent act of self-creation, within and outside fixed forms. Fixed forms, of thinking and of acting, are rooted in the past; human existence occurs in a permanent present and thus has the possibility of eluding and creating itself outside of those forms, ever changing and ever re-configuring itself. Communities have the possibility to give visibility to structures of

feeling and to enable them to exert pressure on mainstream, fixed world views or dominant forms of decoding social reality. Communities also have the possibility of saving structures of feeling from incorporation (which means robbing them of their creative and creating power) by enabling them to preserve their ability to respond to and engage with life's felt and lived issues rather than respond to and engage with socially acceptable and normalised issues. Or, to frame it in Williams's words, to remain within the realm of 'practical consciousness' rather than be suffocated by the fixed structures of 'official consciousness' (Williams, 1977, p.131).

This I find very pertinent to analyse the capability of the co-operative model as a particular form of community that has the potential to enable local communities to engage with the present, to dream of possible alternative futures, and most importantly, to practically contribute towards more equitable future societies. Communities and community-based co-operatives can be the creative spaces where people grow together at individual and collective levels. They can provide the space where emergent world views, alternative possibilities, and oppositional stances can take root and shape and give hope to people who have to bear the brunt of oppression or injustice that is excused or justified in the name of preserving hegemony, hegemonic politics, hegemonic ways of creating and regenerating financial capital at levels that go from the local to the global for the benefit of the few and at the expense of the many. The contention here is that co-operative communities are inclusive structures that not only survive and thrive on non-formal and informal learning, creating technical knowledge (or learning how to read the word, in Freirean terms (Freire, 1990, p.60)), but they can also enable people to read the world in order to change it by associating themselves with others in their quest to build more equitable societies where people can find their humanisation and fulfilment.

2.8   Conclusion

In this chapter I have argued that communities are voluntaristic collectives where people learn, grow and reach human fulfilment by engaging with real life issues. They provide creative spaces for dialogue and action as people collectively develop their world views while engaging with the world. I also discussed how communities can become not only a voice but a veritable creative laboratory for working towards a more just and equitable world. Exploring Raymond Williams's paradigm of hegemony I

argued that communities are best placed to be active in those areas where hegemony cannot or does not care to reach and control. Here they can provide the right environment where alternative or even oppositional structures of feeling can be cultivated and turned from feelings to praxis, that is, passing from a state of flux to a state where they can engage with hegemony and change it.

In the next chapter I will explore the complicated relationship which co-operative communities have had with hegemony since their inception in the early years of the nineteenth century. I will discuss their origins as a counter-hegemonic movement that struggled in order to find the right sustainable formula that would enable community-based co-operatives to thrive in a hostile hegemonic environment. I will also delve into how, once the right formula was established at Rochdale, a co-operative movement made a claim for legitimacy, reclaiming a place and space at the national but also international level for a different, more equitable, kind of production and consumption model. Finally the next chapter will discuss how the co-operative model in the UK developed as an emergent consolidated movement that sometimes challenged, sometimes compromised with, and at one point even risked being swept away by hegemony.

Chapter 3

Challenging capitalism: the co-operative as an emergent economic model

3.1   Introduction

Arguing about the Industrial Revolution in Britain as one that is still unfolding, Williams posits that

> industrial development is a powerful incentive to new kinds of democratic organization. On the other hand the apparent needs of industrial organization, at many levels from the process of accumulating capital to the status of the worker in a very extensive and divided technical system, sometimes delay, sometimes frustrate the aspiration to share in the making of decisions. The complex interaction between the democratic and industrial revolutions is at the centre of our most difficult social thinking (Williams, 2001, p.11).

The development of co-operatives in Britain bridges both revolutions. Not only did parliamentary democracy develop alongside the rapid developments in industrial and capitalist organisation in liberal Britain, but workers sought to develop alternative democratic ways of organising production and access to commodities. Devising community-based organisational solutions to economic problems outside the sphere of the dominant economic, financial and political structures, they claimed or created spaces at community, regional, national and international level, seeking grassroots consensus around emergent alternative and oppositional ways of meeting local communities' basic needs (Majee and Hoyt, 2011, p.52). As they did so they put pressure on the political governance of the state to claim also the legal framework in which their alternative models could operate and proliferate. As the co-operative movement developed, it was learning not only how to run a business but also how to envision a different way of enabling people to lead the kind of lives they valued, built on mutual help and solidarity rather than on competition. With the havoc that the

Industrial Revolution brought to rural and urban communities, mutuality and self-help had to be re-invented in a way that could survive in the new economic environment that was developing alongside the industrial revolution. The co-operative model seemed to offer a different way out. In this chapter I will explore the way in which co-operation developed in Britain as a bottom up, community based response to the way capitalism was evolving at the height of the Industrial Revolution. I will also explore how co-operation as an ideology evolved from a utopian vision to a practical alternative to liberal and neo-liberal capitalism as well as the role that intellectuals had in the development of ideological and pragmatic co-operative alternatives to hegemonic modes of production, retailing and consumption. I will also delve into the pragmatic and ideological tensions that developed within the movement in Britain as it moved from a grassroots movement into a corporate structure, particularly in the consumer co-operative movement. Alongside a discussion of these tensions I will also discuss the ways in which the movement tried to survive in a hostile and troublesome, sometimes chaotic, environment. I will discuss the issue of survival together with such issues as the need to create spaces for agency, the need for legitimacy and consensus over the ideology of co-operation, the dangers of co-optation and the related challenge of robbing co-operation of its promise of an emergent, alternative, sometimes oppositional way of being and growing, of being and growing together, and of being and growing equitably.

3.2   What is co-operation?

Co-operatives developed in reaction to liberal capitalist economy at the height of the Industrial Revolution in Britain, which was creating unbridgeable social inequalities, distorting human relations in a way perhaps best described by Charles Dickens in such novels as *Hard Times* or *Little Dorrit*. The Utopian Socialists of the early 19th century saw in co-operation an alternative model for socio-economic development, based on a set of moral virtues and on a scientific, perhaps positivistic, approach towards the building of a better, more humane and egalitarian society. Paden (2003) argues that while Utopian Socialists like Saint Simon "emphasized large-scale plans to rationally transform the whole of society," others like Fourier and Robert Owen "focused on the design of small-scale utopian communities" (Paden, 2003, p.84-85).

At the organisational level the co-operative differs from the industrial capitalist model since it is community based. Empowered entrepreneurial members of the

community come together out of their own free will to work together towards satisfying common goals and are free to remain within the organisation only as long as they feel they have something to benefit or to contribute to the enterprise. The goals of the enterprise are not only economic but usually relate to wider community wellbeing and go beyond working for profit. Baron (2007) cites the International Co-operative Alliance to argue that

> co-*operatives are based on voluntary agreement of persons to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs*. Indeed, freedom is another co-operative principle, and members should be able to enter and exit a co-operative freely. For the ICA, *true co-operation with others arises from a belief in mutual help* (Zeuli and Cropp 2004) (Baron, 2007, p.295).

Co-operatives are owned solely by member-shareholders and not by anonymous investors at the stock exchange. The members are the ones who determine who should manage the enterprise on their behalf. Any member can have more than one share but never more than a pre-established benchmark. The value of the shares is fixed and thus has no trading value. Electoral processes are conducted on the basis of 'one person one vote', irrespective of the number of shares a member may own. Surpluses are distributed to shareholders not on the basis of the amount or value of the shares but on the basis of patronage: the more you do business with or through the co-op, the higher your dividend. The United States Department of Agriculture sums up these principles thus:

> The co-operative corporation is a business owned and controlled by the people who use its services. Co-operatives are controlled by a board of directors (elected by member-owners), derive equity from member-owners, operate for the benefit of member-owners, and allocate earnings to members based on use (USDA, 2001, p.1).

Similarly, Wagner (2013) describes co-operatives as business organisations that "are characterized by democratic ownership and control, allowing consumers and workers to participate more actively in their economic environment" (Wagner, 2013, p.141).

In a co-op, members are more than providers of capital or harvesters of profits. A co-op is expected to perform its business according to ethical standards that contribute to the well-being of its member-owners, its employees and consumers. Profit is not the sole benchmark for success. Using terms very reminiscent of John Dewey, Wagner argues that

The community and its existing assets should serve as the locus of growth. Similarly, growth must not diminish the well-being of community members despite profitability. Scholars like Gar Alperovitz have long posited that economic democracy offers a means by which urban redevelopment can occur through community participation. When community members can participate in the ownership and management of local enterprises, they ensure that the enterprises more accurately represent the market needs of the community while abstaining from harmful practices such as errant pollution and unfair employment standards (Wagner, 2013. p.41).

The implicit argument is that co-operatives can operate according to high ethical standards because they are democratically controlled by communities and not by anonymous shareholders.

In the final instance, the co-operative is a business model that finds the necessary balance between an ethical business ethos and financial sustainability. Ignoring the need for profits would take away credibility from a democratic alternative to the capitalist model. Putting profit above anything else would erode the co-operative model's moral high ground. Peter Marks, CEO of the Co-operative Group from 2008 onwards, argued that failing to strike a balance was leading the Co-operative Group to become "the most ethical business in the corporate graveyard." He argued in favour of a more self-confident business-oriented approach that saw in the ethical-stance a value added. He was of the strong opinion that "ethics are a tie-breaker – everything else, price, quality, has to be as good as the competition" (Wilson, J. F., Webster, A. and Vorberg-Rugh, R., 2013, p.394). If Dickens and others as we shall see below, portray the Industrial Revolution as a development that distorted human relationships, the Italian league of co-operatives, *Legacoop* (2005), describes co-operation as "a system which is intent upon following the technological and productive developments without distorting the essence of solidarity which is the basis of co-operation itself" (translated from *Legacoop* Reggio Emilia, 2005, p.3).

3.3 A utopian beginning to a practical end: Robert Owen and William King's contribution to the ideology of co-operation

In the concluding remarks to *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* Weber (2007) argues that Protestantism had fostered a work ethic based on hard work and an ascetic outlook marked by a detachment from worldly goods expressed through a restrained consumption. However, he was of the opinion that the ascetic inclination to

restrain the attachment to worldly goods was becoming very difficult to practise and the urge to showcase capital accumulation through consumption was difficult to resist. When moral and ethical rigour falls by the wayside, "mundane passions" take over the human spirit. Weber argues that this is the "last stage" of a "cultural development" of which "it might be truly said: "Specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved" (Weber, 2007, p.124).

It was against the *amorality* that characterized the Industrial Revolution in Britain that the Welshman Robert Owen (1771-1858) developed his ideas and tried to put them into practice. In his *Report to the County of Lanark* (1821) Owen describes the results of the moral and ethical atrophy that accompanied the potentially very useful inventions that made the Industrial Revolution possible:

> The steam engine and spinning machines, with the endless mechanical inventions to which they have given rise, have, however, inflicted evils on society, which now greatly over-balance the benefits which are derived from them. They have created an aggregate of wealth, and placed it in the hands of a few, who, by its aid, continue to absorb the wealth produced by the industry of the many. Thus the mass of the population are become mere slaves to the ignorance and caprice of these monopolists, and are far more truly helpless and wretched than they were before the names of WATT and ARKWRIGHT were known (Owen, 1821, p.15).

According to Owen the socio-economic system that prevailed at the height of the Industrial Revolution had managed to degrade people from all strata of society "below the ordinary state of animals, and to render them more miserable and irrational" (Owen, 1821, p.32).

Owen was a professed atheist. His ideas were grounded in a secular and positivistic outlook, arguing that true social reform "will be effected through the knowledge which will be derived from the science of the influence of circumstances over human nature" (Owen, 1821, p.32). His proposals for social reform had at their core the creation of "villages of co-operation" (Robertson, 2010, p.2). In his *Report to the County of Lanark* (1821) he describes at length what such villages should look like. Built in the form of a parallelogram,

> with residential buildings on all four sides in which the town's 1200 citizens would be housed according to their marital status [...]. In its centre and at its corners would be the common buildings that housed factories, kitchens,

schools, and even a conservatory. The community itself would be built in a rural setting so that there would be fields close by to provide both food and work for the inhabitants (Paden, 2003, p.85).

Community members would lead a communitarian way of life, working together, sharing resources and using the surplus of their production in order to exchange it for other necessities obtained from other similar communities. Children would be educated informally through the provision of a moral environment permeating the social fabric of the community, as well as formally in the community schools. In Owen's words,

> When the new arrangements shall become familiar to the parties, this superior mode of living may be enjoyed at far less expense and with much less trouble than are necessary to procure such meals as the poor are now compelled to eat, surrounded by every object of discomfort and disgust, in the cellars and garrets of the most unhealthy courts, alleys, and lanes, in London, Dublin, and Edinburgh, or Glasgow, Manchester, Leeds, and Birmingham (Owen, 1821, p.36).

Owen was a successful manager and businessman in Manchester. In 1799 he married the daughter of the owner of cotton mills at New Lanark in Scotland and became a partner in his father-in-law's enterprise. Here he improved the living conditions of the workers at the mills. According to Rhodes (2012) at New Lanark, Owen showed his mettle as a social reformer because he

> created better working conditions as well as improving workers' housing. Most revolutionary of all, he set about educating workers and their children not only in the three 'Rs' (r)eading, (w)riting and (a)rithmetic, but in subjects aimed at improving pupils' moral fibre (Rhodes, 2012, p.19).

Owen is also renowned for his experiments in setting up villages that would live up to the expectations he set out in his *Report to the County of Lanark* (1821), what Robertson calls, the "complete community ideal" (Robertson, 2010, p.2). Curl (2009) writes that in 1817 Owen presented a plan to the House of Commons, "unveiling his plan to replace capitalism and requesting government assistance to set up the first of these Villages of Co-operation or Home Colonies" (Curl, 2009, p.285). But he is quick to note that "The capitalists in control of the House of Commons rejected him out of hand" (Curl, 2009, p.285). In 1825 Owen relocated to America. Addressing the House of Representatives he argued that in his proposed co-operative villages,

> when the new arrangements shall be regularly organized and completed, a few hours daily of health and desirable employment, chiefly applied to direct

modern mechanical and other scientific improvements, will be amply sufficient to create a full supply, at all times, of the best of every thing for every one (cited in Curl, 2009, p.286).

In that same year Owen invested huge sums in the setting up of the New Harmony community. Operating on a co-operative basis the 900-strong community prospered and Owen used the success of the experiment to tour the US and speak about the benefits of Socialism. Back at New Harmony, he suggested that they should "switch from a co-operative community, with each receiving material benefits according to work performed, to a commune with each receiving according to need." Curl says that "The people of New Harmony, excited at the prospect, decided to dive in headfirst. They met with disaster". A potentially successful socio-economic model was disbanded in 1826 (Curl, 2009, p.288), and the failure "swallowed much of [Owen's] private fortune" (Rhodes, 2012, p.19). Other unsuccessful experiments were carried out at Orbiston in Scotland (1825-1827), Ralahine in Ireland (1831-1833) and Queenwood in southern England (1839-1845). None survived Owen himself, who died in 1858 (Rhodes, 2012, p.19).

Nonetheless, Owen left a wealth of theory for social reform. What emerges from his writings and speeches is a strong denunciation of capitalism as well as an ardent belief in the possibility of a socio-economic alternative based on the right of every person to fulfil himself or herself as a human being by being nurtured in the right moral environment epitomised by the co-operative community. Owen stands out as a middle class entrepreneur who had the audacity to go back to the drawing board and come back with socio-economic models based on co-operative living.

Another important figure in the history of co-operation is Dr William King, a Christian Socialist who studied history and philosophy at Cambridge and became a medical doctor and a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians. Through his inclination for philanthropic work, he helped set up a co-operative in Brighton and apparently became so much enthusiastic about the idea that he decided to educate a wider audience about the benefits of co-operation through the publication of *The Co-operator* (Wilson, Webster and Vorberg-Rugh, 2013, p.31) which he issued on a monthly basis from May 1st 1828 to August 1st 1830 (Mercer, 1922). His motives for disseminating the co-operative model were not very different from Owen's and his contribution towards the co-operative movement is no less a reaction to the way that capitalism was

evolving in Britain at the height of the Industrial Revolution. William's exhortations in *The Co-operator* had at least two aims, one of consciousness raising, and the other of providing practical knowledge to workers on how to create the co-operative alternative to industrial capitalism. He had no qualms about the fact that "Co-operation is a subject entirely for the *working classes*. The *rich* have nothing to do with it" (*The Co-operator*, Issue no. 2, June 1, 1828, in Mercer, 1922, p.8). In the very first issue of *The Co-operator* he spells out the evils of capitalism, denouncing the ever widening divide between rich and poor. He writes how,

> The rate of wages has been gradually diminishing for some hundred years, so that now it is not above one-third of what it used to be—but this is not all, for the same causes continuing to act, the wages must go on diminishing till a workman will not be able to maintain a family; and by the same rule, he will at last not be able to maintain himself (*The Co-operator*, Issue no. 1, May 1, 1828, in Mercer, 1922, p.1).

According to King, the results of this downward trend were "the great and increasing difficulties of providing for our families, and the proportionate danger of our falling into pauperism and crime" (*The Co-operator*, Issue no. 1, May 1, 1828, in Mercer, 1922, p.1). In the second issue of *The Co-operator* King speaks of the effects of false consciousness, showing how because of hegemonic forces, workers put their energy at the service of the capitalist rather than of their own class. He argues that

> if a master has capital enough to employ an hundred men, and those men, by their work, return that capital with profit—if those men had that capital, as a common property, they certainly could support themselves upon it, as before, till their work was brought to market, and the capital returned with a profit (The Co-operator, Issue no. 2, June 1, 1828, in Mercer, 1922, p.8).

King's second aim was to give advice on how to set up and run co-operatives. While Owen put his own money in the co-operative villages he wanted to set up, King believed that workers could raise the initial capital themselves. He envisaged a progressive developmental model in which workers would come together to pool capital, set up an enterprise while still living in capitalist society and eventually, when the enterprise would have raised enough funds, they could move on to set up an Owenite community. In *The Co-operator* he sets out the plan very clearly:

> We must form ourselves into a Society for this especial purpose; we must form a fund by weekly deposits; as soon as it is large enough, we must lay it out in various commodities, which we must place in a common store, from which all members must purchase their common necessaries, and the profit will form a

common capital to be again laid out in the commodities most wanted. Thus we shall have two sources of accumulation—the weekly subscription, and the profit on articles sold (…) This capital, by being judiciously turned over, will accumulate even faster than at the rate here mentioned, and may be employed in any way the Society may think most advisable. The Society will be able now to find work for some of its own members, the whole produce of whose labor will be common property, instead of that small part of which we spoke. As the capital accumulates still farther, it will employ all the members, and then the advantages will be considerable indeed. Every member of the society will work, there will be no idlers […]. When any of the members are ill, they will live and have medical attendance at the common expense. When the capital has accumulated sufficiently, the Society may purchase land, live upon it, cultivate it themselves, and produce any manufactures they please, and so provide for all their wants of food, clothing, and houses. The Society will then be called a Community (The Co-operator, Issue no. 1, May 1, 1828, in Mercer, 1922, p.3).

King must have been encouraged by the increasing number of co-operatives that were being set up around Britain. In his journal he regularly listed newly formed co-operatives, using the list as a manifestation of the practicability of the co-operative model he championed. In the last issue of *The Co-operator* he could boast that

The certainty of success, if those principles be acted upon, has been, we believe we may say, demonstrated; and three hundred Societies have started up to put these principles to the test (*The Co-operator*, Issue no. 28, August 1, 1830, in Mercer, 1922, p.112).

Most of these initiatives were not very long-lasting. Notwithstanding Owen's and King's endeavours to disseminate and convince the working classes about the benefits of co-operation, both had failed to provide a sustainable model. Birchall (1997) argues that "This first co-operative movement was a vast outpouring of activity, creating at least 300 and probably 500 shops. But by 1831 it had virtually collapsed" (Birchall, 1997, p.5)

Wilson, Webster and Vorberg-Rugh (2013) give four reasons for this failure. First, these initial co-operatives were set up in a difficult economic environment which hit hard both the co-operatives and the communities that sustained them. Secondly, there was no legal framework that recognised co-operatives as legal bodies with limited liability; risks and responsibilities in the eyes of the law were squarely placed on the shoulders of individuals. It was only in the 1850s that a proper legal framework started to take shape. Thirdly, notwithstanding Owen's and King's endeavours, it turned out that workers were neither well educated in co-operation, nor did they have enough incentives to remain as members in the long term. In Wilson, Webster and Vorberg-Rugh's words, "industrial society, for all its difficulties, did at times offer

higher wages and living standards, at least when the economy was booming" (Wilson, Webster and Vorberg-Rugh, 2013, p.33). In the end, the utopian idea of a self-sufficient working class community was not as appealing as Owen and King believed it to be.

For his part Birchall (1997) agrees that a British government hostile to the working class would not be expected to enact laws that would facilitate the setting up of working class co-operatives. He also agrees that the economic climate of the time did not help either. Thirdly, Birchall argues that co-operatives that started off with a profit, did not know how to distribute those profits "and so members had to dissolve their societies in order to be paid out" (Birchall, 1997, p.5).

Both Robert Owen and William King were enthusiastic, benevolent intellectuals who were concerned with the situation of the working class in industrial capitalist Britain. Both ardently believed in co-operation as an alternative that might live alongside, and eventually substitute, capitalism. In Gramscian terms they were both traditional intellectuals who, though coming from the middle classes, endeavoured to raise the consciousness of workers as an oppressed class. After the undoing of New Harmony, Owen dedicated himself to the dissemination of socialist ideals. Mercer (1922) describes how after issuing the last number of *The Co-operator*, King broke all ties with the co-operative movement to dedicate himself to his medical career (Mercer, 1922, p.xxvii). But Owen and King must be credited with having the audacity to propose an alternative to a hegemonic economic model that had the unwavering support of the political class at the time. They laid the ground within civil society for a different way of conceiving production, consumption, working life and mutual help. Through their zealous belief in a more just economic structure, they believed they could entice local communities to organise themselves and challenge contemporary capitalism. They had aroused conscientization, but had failed to come up with a workable and sustainable emergent model that could stand up to capitalist modes of production and consumption and survive in the long term. Owen felt he had to act *for* the working classes, by organising co-operative communities *for* them. King believed he had to educate the working classes so that they could organise co-operative ventures for themselves. In the end, while Owen provided the ideological framework for co-operation, it was William King's model that prevailed when the right symbiosis was found in Rochdale, north of Manchester.

3.4   From Utopia to Rochdale: towards a sustainable blueprint for consumer co-operation

It is now a commonplace belief in the history of co-operation that the first sustainable co-operative model was concocted in Rochdale, Lancashire, in 1844. Twenty-eight weavers and artisans set up a consumer co-operative that "enabled workers to institutionally pool their market power and ensure consumption goods were bought in bulk and at discounted prices." They also came up with an organisational framework that was spelled out in what passed down in history as *the Rochdale principles*, a set of rules that "served as the foundation for subsequent co-operative development" (Satgar, 2007, p.59-60).

The Rochdale people who set up the co-operative shop in Toad Lane in 1844 were influenced by the ground-breaking spadework of Owen and King as much as by a necessity to put up with economic hardship. The Rochdale Pioneers professed co-operative, socialist and Christian values, aiming at righting the wrongs of industrial capitalism. The financial and economic situation in which they found themselves placed them at the mercy of an advancing industrialism that was wiping away the Rochdale traditional cottage industry, supplanting it with mass, industrial, mechanised production. Their acquaintance with Owen and King provided them with an ideological framework that gave direction to their endeavours to find alternative sustainable ethical business models. Owen and King provided them with the necessary ideological analysis and political motivation to not only become aware of themselves as an exploited caste in an inequitable political and economic system, but also provided them with the intuition that something could be done to counteract the dominant mode of production. Most importantly, it provided them with the conviction that if something could be done, it was only the exploited that could do something about it. Owen and King had done enough ideological conscientization groundwork to empower the exploited and oppressed to envision a different counter-dominant world order and to bring about changes in that world order by working from the local community upwards. Situated at the periphery of political and economic hegemony, in the small troubled town of Rochdale, they could claim and create a space to organise themselves into an emergent culture of community-based organisation held in place by a value system that was diametrically opposed to that espoused by the powers that be. Their belief in mutuality, democracy and shared ownership was the antithesis of what the

Industrial Revolution stood for in social, political and economic terms, based as it was on laissez-faire liberalism.

Carreiro (2009) explains how Rochdale "had been the site of labor conflict as the power loom quickly replaced the work done by handloom weavers" (Carreiro, 2009, p.2). Similarly, Rhodes (2012) describes how

> Rochdale, and its surrounding areas, was fundamentally changed by industrialisation. Their long-established flannel manufacture had faced changes in its methods of production. Factory-based power looms were displacing individual home-based handloom weavers. In addition, exports were being adversely affected by American tariffs. Rochdale's other main industry, hat-making, was in outright decline. Such restructuring led to civil unrest in Rochdale and the nearby West Riding of Yorkshire. Some strikes and disturbances even led to the military being called in to restore order. A number of radical elements began calling for factory and political reforms (Rhodes, 2012, p.25).

It is clear that the Industrial Revolution had disturbed socio-economic relations in Rochdale, supplanting them with degrading living conditions for those who became members of the oppressed working class that fuelled the industrial machine. Systems of production formerly based on a dispersed ownership of the means of production were being wiped out by large scale production systems that were amassed in hands of those few who had the capital. It is within this turbulent economic and social revolution that the Rochdale co-operative was set up.

Rhodes (2012, p.26) describes the group that set up the co-op as a mixture of teetotallers, Chartists and Owenites, all of whom had had their fair share of activism against the kind of industrialisation that was deeply affecting their lives. Birchall (1997) describes this group in some detail:

> Some were Owenite Socialists who had put their money into the last of Owen's model communities, Queenwood, and it had become obvious that this model would not solve the problems of all but a privileged few. Some were Chartists, agitating for the vote and a political solution, but by 1842 this movement was beginning to collapse, 'its leaders jailed or transported, its supporters demoralised'. Some were active religious leaders, or teetotallers, whose prescription was to live an austere and virtuous life, though their chosen brand of unitarian methodism was the most down to earth of all the sects. Finally, they were committed trade unionists, and had experienced the wave of strikes of 1842, a confrontation which the weavers had eventually lost. After this defeat some had seriously considered emigration, but then decided to switch the twopence a week they had been paying into the weavers' union to a fund to set up a co-op shop. They had one before, in 1833-5, but it had failed through giving

too much credit to members. This time they got it right; the way they structured their society ensured not only that they prospered but that the movement would grow rapidly throughout Britain (Birchall, 1997, p.6).

Rhodes (2012) describes the Owenites within this group as members of the Universal Community Society of Rational Religionists who set up branch number twenty-four in Rochdale at an annex of the Weavers' Arms and which named itself the New Social Institution. It was in their branch that the Rochdale Pioneers co-operative was set up in August 1844. Their store opened its doors for the first time on the 21st of December of that same year (Rhodes, 2012, p.26).

The aims of the Rochdale Pioneers were not very different from those that Robert Owen had set for his co-operative communities. They also seem to be a cut-out from a copy of King's *The Co-operator*, written in very similar language, and setting such goals as raising enough capital among members to be able to set up a store, and then, from the generated profits, expanding into housing for members, providing decent employment in factories and farms owned by the co-operative, and ultimately setting up a self-supporting community with its own "production, distribution, education and government" (Rhodes, 2012, p.27). But why did the co-operatives set up or inspired by Owen and King fail while the Equitable Rochdale Pioneers Society became a success? What did the Rochdale Pioneers do differently?

The first annual almanac of the Rochdale co-operative outlined a set of rules which declared:

- That capital should be of their own providing and bear a fixed rate of interest.
- That only the purest provisions procurable should be supplied to members.
- That full weight and measure should be given.
- That market prices should be charged and no credit given nor asked.
- That profits should be divided pro rata upon the amount of purchases made by each member.
- That the principle of 'one member one vote' should obtain in government and the equality of the sexes in membership.
- That the management should be in the hands of officers and committee elected periodically.
- That a definite percentage of profits should be allotted to education.
- That frequent statements and balance sheets should be presented to members.

(The Rochdale Pioneers Museum, 2014, no pagination).

Wagner (2013, p.41) argues that what was unique in these foundation principles was that they managed to strike the right balance between profitability and concern for members' and the community's wellbeing. Birchall (2007, p.9) for his part says that these principles managed to combine the principle of democracy with the principle of basic education for members, which meant that members became "wise enough to run their society well". Besides, the principle of selling unadulterated goods gave the Rochdale Equitable Pioneers Society an edge over competition from other retailers since "adulteration of food, shoddy clothing and shoes, were a fact of life until government regulation began to have an effect towards the end of the century" (Birchall, 2007, p.10).

However, Rhodes (2012) singles out the idea of a dividend paid to members in proportion to their spending at the co-operative shop as the factor that most contributed to the success of the Rochdale model. She explains that the Pioneers had decided to sell at current market prices in order to avoid being accused of unfair competition by private retailers. According to Rhodes, operating their store in this way meant that the co-operative ended up with a surplus that was "equivalent to a private traders' profit." The principles mandated that this surplus was to be divided among members in proportion to their purchases from the co-operative store. Rhodes argues that this system encouraged "members' loyalty and sense of identity with the co-operative" (Rhodes, 2012, p.29).

It seems that the Rochdale Equitable Pioneers had found a system that would ensure a balance between members' self-interest and the financial sustainability of the co-operative. Members had invested in the co-operative in the form of £1 shares. They knew that it was in their self-interest to buy from the co-operative store because the more they bought necessities from there the higher their return on investment would be. On the other hand the dividend was strictly governed by the principle of patronage, meaning that it was shared equitably among members depending on the amount of purchases they did from their co-operative store. Members who were not purchasing anything from the store were not to expect any return on investment and were precluded from preying upon the other members' loyalty towards the co-operative. At the same time the financial commitments of the society at the end of the financial year would never exceed the surplus generated through trade with its own members. Once this structural balance was found between self-interest and the common good based on the principle of equity and loyalty, the other principles of one-person-one-vote,

members' education, and the provision of high quality goods all became value added to a profitable venture that was financially sustainable, democratic, educative and respectful of members' dignity.

All the historical evidence points to a co-operative model that thrived on the cultural baggage that every member brought to the new structure. Put together, the members engendered structures of feeling that were oppositional to the dominant economic and political culture of the time. It was a democratic community that was ideologically sustained and practically owned and managed by the participating workers. Working together they learned how co-operation can create development routes that are at variance with the hegemonic political beliefs espoused by the lawmakers of the time (Wilson, Webster and Vorberg-Rugh, 2013, p.47). The informal learning within the Rochdale group led the participants to create that practical field where the structures of feeling of opposition to the mainstream economic organisation of society could take more concrete shape and defy possible dominant cynicism with practical sustainability. The informal learning experiences within the Rochdale co-operative community led participants to learn not only how to run their co-op on long-term sustainable lines, something which Owen and King had failed to do, but they also managed to make the case for the co-operative emergent model as a new model for enabling the working class to purchase its necessities. While privately owned stores were driven by the promotion of consumption, the co-operative community store was driven by the need to cater for the community's daily needs. It also took community organisation to new levels, enabling other communities to see in co-operation a possible solution for their needs, and to envision and create their own community-based co-operative alternative in different towns across the United Kingdom.

3.5   The Co-operative Wholesale Society and The Co-operative Group: the tensions between operating within and outside of hegemony

The 160 years after the founding of the Rochdale Equitable Pioneers Society saw the proliferation of co-operative stores in England, Wales and Scotland, the construction of a national identity for the movement through a federal union, and the development of a co-operative business model that swayed from extreme fragmentation to the construction of a centralized business group based in Manchester that could compete with corporate capitalist business organizations.

Robertson (2010) argues that co-operative stores had become part of the British urban and rural landscape. By the onset of the Second World War local co-operative societies provided networks of department stores in many cities, selling a wide array of commodities. With the proliferation of urban working class neighbourhoods, some societies opened stores in new housing estates and "adjusted their opening hours to give working women time to shop." In rural areas co-operative societies opened community stores and reached out to outlying villages by opening branches or by operating a van delivery service (Robertson, 2010, p.24). For example, the Kettering co-operative had branch stores in five different outlying villages around Kettering. It also serviced a further twenty-five smaller communities through a van delivery service, supplying groceries, clothes, boots and sports equipment (Robertson, 2010, p.25).

How did such a culture of co-operative consumerism develop? What were the main challenges it faced along the years? What were the inherent contradictions that characterised the movement?

Birchall (1997) gives two reasons for the co-operative movement's proliferation in Britain. First he argues that retail operations in Britain were not able to keep up with the huge population movements caused by the Industrial Revolution. Weekly markets, small shops and itinerant peddlers were still the order of the day. The co-operative movement that started in Rochdale was flexible enough to instigate communities to set up their own community stores or to require successful co-operative societies in neighbouring towns and villages to open branch stores in their localities. Birchall argues that the co-operative movement "rapidly learned how to run chains of stores; it was in effect the first multiple retailer" (Birchall, 1997, p.9). Secondly Birchall also mentions the successful verticalization of operations, supporting retailing with wholesaling, going as far back in the supply chain as possible, sourcing out supplies in Britain and abroad. Co-operatives integrated parts of their wholesaling operations to supply different community stores belonging to different societies. When producer and worker co-operatives within the chain faltered, the consumer movement was strong enough to stand in and take over, further integrating production, wholesale and retail. Eventually the consumer co-operative movement started manufacturing its own commodities, becoming one of the biggest employers in Britain (Birchall, 1997, p.9-10). Co-operatives were cultivating in-house practical and technical knowledge on how to run successful community-owned stores that they could share with new

communities interested in setting up their own shops. It is also evident that the community-owned local retail store that started off as an 'emergent, alternative' kind of doing business in the face of normalised retail patterns was gaining legitimacy and consensus among working class neighbourhoods and civil society in general. It was a practical solution to a real-life need that could be exported to other communities.

Wilson et al. (2013) argue that the spread of consumer co-operatives in Britain was the result of two factors. First they mention the missionary zeal of the Rochdale Pioneers and their sympathizers, coupled with coverage by the popular press. Secondly they argue that the second half of the nineteenth century was marked by greater economic prosperity and greater demand for consumer goods (Wilson, Webster and Vorberg-Rugh, 2013, p.43).

The number of co-operatives grew to almost 1,400 by 1900, although as Wilson et al. argue, the distribution was uneven, "with a marked preponderance of co-operatives in the industrial areas of the North and the Midlands" (Wilson, Webster and Vorberg-Rugh, 2013, p.43). However, the lawmakers were slow to respond to the developments on the ground. It was in 1852 that the Industrial and Provident Societies' Act gave some form of legal protection to co-operatives (Wilson, Webster and Vorberg-Rugh, 2013, p.47). It must be telling that, though the act was meant to regularise co-operatives, no mention of co-operatives was made in the title of the act. It was to be expected that while consensus was building up from below, the lawmakers who had every intention to ensure economic growth and political stability would simply react to rather than proactively promote the proliferation of community-based consumer co-operatives. The reaction of the Commons can almost be interpreted in terms of hegemony making the necessary twists and turns in order to preserve itself by accommodating the new developments at grassroots levels causing the least distress possible to the macro-economic system.

Nonetheless the co-operative movement continued to evolve. Given the increasing number of co-operative retail societies, it was clear at the outset that it would make economic sense for them to get together and buy in bulk in order to secure better wholesale prices. At first the Rochdale Pioneers "began wholesaling for other societies" (Birchall, 1997, p. 9). But a local society could not be expected to do the wholesaling for the movement. A federal co-operative society could do the work but this was not possible because the act of 1852 did not permit corporate membership of

primary co-operatives into federative or secondary co-operative structures. This became possible through a second Industrial and Provident Society Act in 1862 which also introduced the principle of limited liability to co-operative societies. Community-based retail co-operative societies were quick to act. Wilson et al. (2013, p.51) write how at a conference in April 1863, 200 delegates from local retail co-operatives called for the establishment of an agency that would source supplies on a wholesale basis in order to supply local retail societies. The original name given to the new secondary federative co-operative was the North of England Co-operative Wholesale Agency and Depot Society Ltd (NECWADS), subscribed by forty-eight co-operatives. In March of the following year it started its operations from a small depot in Manchester (Wilson, Webster and Vorberg-Rugh, 2013, p.51, 52). This was later to become the Co-operative Wholesale Society (CWS). Birchall (1997) sums up the spiralling growth of the CWS by describing how by the turn of the twentieth century it

> imported cheap food from abroad, organising the distribution of Irish butter, Danish bacon, Indian tea and Canadian wheat, owning depots in the exporting countries and in the process helping indigenous agricultural and consumer co-operative movements. […] When ship owners put up their prices, the CWS simply began its own shipping line. The result was that the British public got the benefit of regular supplies of pure, cheap food, with minimal distribution costs and all the profits handed to them in dividend (Birchall, 1997, p.10).

The events that follow the founding of the CWS imply a strong sense of self-confidence in the consumer co-operation in Britain, bolstered by the financial success of the retail co-operative movement both at the local and at the federative level. In fact, within the space of thirteen years from the foundation of the CWS, at least five major developments took place that all contributed to the consolidation of the movement. In 1867 a Co-operative Insurance Company (CIC) was set up, while a year later a Scottish Co-operative Wholesale Society (SCWS) was founded with the purpose of servicing Scottish community based co-operatives on the same lines of the CWS in England and Wales. The CIC was later to become the Co-operative Insurance Society (CIS) and in 1913 it was taken over by the CWS and SCWS (Wilson, Webster and Vorberg-Rugh, 2013, p.70, 135-136). In 1872 the CWS set up a loan and deposit department which in 1876 became a banking department (Rhodes, 2012, p.44).

At the political level, in 1870 British co-operatives set up a Co-operative Union, described by Wilson et al. as "the political voice and debating forum of the movement" (Wilson, Webster and Vorberg-Rugh, 2013, p.70). After being largely ignored as a

movement in food importation and rationing policies enacted during the First World War to counter the food shortages caused by enemy action, the movement decided to set up its own political party, ending a policy of political neutrality (Wilson, Webster and Vorberg-Rugh, 2013, p.150). In 1927 the Co-operative Party forged an electoral agreement with the Labour Party and since then, most Co-operative Party candidates have stood for election on the Labour Party ticket (The Co-operative Party, 2014). Both the Co-operative Union (today merged into Co-ops UK) and the Co-operative Party could be a way how co-operatives struggle for legitimacy and consensus within civil society, creating structures that provide visibility and with an identity that is strong and distinctive enough to avoid incorporation. In this sense the 'alliance' with the Labour Party could, and can still be, problematic. All depends on how the Co-operative Party manages the relationship without being swallowed up by the larger party organisation. At the ideological level the game is about putting the co-operative ideals and interests on the national agenda by associating with such a large political organisation as the Labour Party. But this also depends on whether the Labour Party views co-operatives as desirable within its vision for society and, more crucially, on whether the Labour Party's ideology, a shifting framework in every sense, tallies with the socialist founding principles of co-operation.

The financial success of the consumer co-operation and the visibility of the movement at the political level brought with it also internal tensions at various levels and over various issues over the next century. Going through CWS history, four pragmatic and ideological tensions could be identified in the development of consumer co-operation in Britain.

A first issue was the tussle between the idea of independent community-based retail co-operative societies whose main aim was to serve their communities at one end, and the centralizing policies enacted by the CWS on its member societies for the sake of financial and economic sustainability. It was a struggle between organisation from below and corporate re-organisation from above. At the local level, co-operatives could provide anything that a community needed, from groceries and household goods to "hairdressing salons, sweet shops, fish and chip shops, jewellers, opticians, funeral furnishers, coal dealers and pharmacies" (Robertson, 2010, p.31). Local co-operatives sometimes ran convalescent homes and supported local charitable institutions such as hospitals and infirmaries (Robertson, 2010, p.35). They also organised educational activities for members, including visits to co-operatives in other countries (Robertson,

2010, p.41). Local societies organised sports activities for employees, members and their children (Robertson, 2010, p.81) and also participated in community events organised by other local organisations, giving their fair share to the social life of the communities in which they were active (Robertson, 2010, p.95). There was also a pragmatic side to this ideological commitment to community. As Wilson et al. (2013) argue, some co-operative stores managed to survive hostility from local private shopkeepers by establishing good relationships with local communities largely by buying from local wholesalers and by organising social activities for the local community. At other times the local managers were bound to source out products from local private wholesalers, given that notwithstanding the rapid expansion of CWS operations in Britain, Europe, the US and the British colonies, it supplied the local co-operatives with just a small part of their necessities (Wilson, Webster and Vorberg-Rugh, 2013, p.61, 63).

On the other hand, the CWS was growing into a mammoth nationwide corporation. Local societies had set up the CWS to manage the sourcing of products on their behalf. However, leaders from both the Co-operative Union and the CWS saw that a further proliferation of local co-operatives

> aggravated difficulties in the coordination of strategy, policy, and practice. Conversely, local co-operative society leaders, protective of their independence, viewed the expansion of the CWS with suspicion (Wilson, Webster and Vorberg-Rugh, 2013, p.99).

At times, particularly in the second half of the twentieth century, the CWS pressed for reforms across the movement aimed at increasing the market share of the co-operative stores' network. But these were often resisted by the affiliate societies who were not ready to sacrifice local societies' independence for the sake of increasing sales through centralised action. However, in the post-war period local societies started finding themselves in difficulties. The solution for many of them was to merge with another nearby local co-op or with the CWS itself. The first consequence of this trend was that some local societies were developing into bigger regional organizations. A second consequence was that the CWS was changing from a secondary co-operative into a hybrid with both corporate members (the local primary co-operatives) and individual members (the persons that formerly constituted the membership base of local societies that had merged into the CWS). This meant that the CWS had to find new ways of developing a functioning centralised structure that would be able to reconcile the

representation of individual members, the representation of local co-operative societies, and the need to consolidate the CWS' and its member societies' share of the retail market (Wilson, Webster and Vorberg-Rugh, 2013, p.282). It can be surmised that at local or regional level, the management committees give priority to the needs of members and communities. At the central level the main issue would be the cut-throat competition for market share on the high street. The main concern behind the consumer co-operative movement metamorphosed itself as it moved from community to corporate level. At the community level the main concern was satisfying the local community's daily needs, with the practical understanding that if a co-op did manage to do that, customers would not be hard to come by. At the corporate level, the main concern became that of competing with conventional corporate chain stores, fighting for market share, competing for customers following a frame of mind that was very hard to distinguish from that of any other conventional business corporation. The tension between periphery and centre, and the need to make sure that power is wielded in a way that the voice of the local communities is heard and has a weight on the decisions taken at Manchester's Angel Square, is still very much at the heart of the developments occurring within the consumer co-operative movement in the UK today (Neate, 2014A, no pagination).

The ideological and political tussle between the committees entrenched in the communities and the leaders situated in Manchester, was accompanied by a parallel one between the leadership of elected local societies' officials on the one hand and non-elected executives hired by the CWS on the other. Local societies and the CWS were being run by elected boards of management who in turn hired professional managers. When the need arose for more co-ordinated and centralized business procedures to increase market share, democracy and representation were pitted against financial sustainability. The need to reconcile the tension between democratic leadership rooted in ideological beliefs and a hired professional business leadership rooted in a capitalist frame of mind is still very much alive within the Co-operative Group that has grown out of the CWS and does not seem to have been resolved yet (Neate, 2014B, no pagination). The question returns: can co-operation live in compromise with capitalism? What should come first, democratic control at the peril of financial sustainability, or hired professional control at the expense of democracy? At the final instant, is the struggle to survive as an alternative model within capitalism too strong to win? It seems like the hegemonic hold of capitalism had left enough grey areas in the second half of the

nineteenth century to permit the setting up of community-based oppositional business models; but now that the co-operative movement had gathered so much legitimacy and visibility, the hegemonic structure of the economy was suffocating its power of agency and putting pressure on the federative co-operative structures to conform to neo-liberal capitalist models in order to secure survival.

A third ideological tension developed between the notion of consumer co-operatives as comrades with trade unions within the labour movement, and consumer co-operatives as employers. The CWS was at once a consumer-led movement and a major employer. Wilson et al. (2012) describe how "Between 1890 and 1910 it built or acquired more than forty factories, workshops, and mills" (Wilson, Webster and Vorberg-Rugh, 2013, p.124). In the period between 1918 and 1920 the number of CWS factories went up to seventy-six (Wilson, Webster and Vorberg-Rugh, 2013, p.178), making it a major employer in Britain. What set the CWS as an employer aside from other employers was the fact that the capital was owned by the consumers themselves and that the final driving force was not profit but providing a good service to member consumers without exploiting the workers, providing the latter with decent wages and working conditions (Wilson, Webster and Vorberg-Rugh, 2013, p.121-122). This placed the consumer co-operative movement in Britain squarely in the labour movement. In fact, a solid part of the customer base of the CWS bank was made up of trade unions and labour-led local authorities (Wilson, Webster and Vorberg-Rugh, 2013, p.266). The co-operatives reciprocated, such as when in 1919 member societies of the CWS resolved that their employees should become members of trade unions affiliated to the TUC (Wilson, Webster and Vorberg-Rugh, 2013, p.187). However, when this ideological settlement was put to the test, it failed miserably. When in the early 1920s the CWS sought to cut down on expenses by lowering labour costs through lowering of wages and reducing staff, tension mounted. Similarly, when in 1926 the TUC organised a general strike, it ordered employees of establishments owned by the CWS to walk out just like all the other employees in private businesses; consequently CWS-owned factories were brought to a halt and local co-operative retail stores were brought to their knees for lack of supplies, throwing store managers into the lap of private wholesalers (Wilson, Webster and Vorberg-Rugh, 2013, p.186-187). More recently, when in 2004-2005 The Co-operative Group reduced its staff by 600 at the group's headquarters in Manchester (Wilson, Webster and Vorberg-Rugh, 2013, p. 364-365), it put the Group's financial sustainability before any other consideration, including

people's jobs, which is not very different from what any other conventional employer would do. Characteristically, in June 2005 the Co-operative News reported that a motion by the representative of the Wales and Borders Region to entice The Co-operative Group to adopt the Living Wage policy for its staff was defeated after Terry Morton, Deputy Chairman of the Group argued that "it was not appropriate at present and urged delegates to reject the idea until such time as the business was able to deliver profits and profitability" (Co-operative News, 2005, no pagination). On the other hand, ten years later, worker-owned co-ops (that is co-ops where the owners were not the consumers but the workers themselves) were more likely to adopt the Living Wage policy given that "Of the 1,970 Living Wage accredited employers, around 30 are co-operatives, including the Phone Co-op, Revolver Coffee and several credit unions" (Harvey, 2015, no pagination). Here one has to tie back to the previous ideological tension of community versus federal centre since workers' co-ops are more likely to be smaller in size and therefore the management committee more likely to be closer to the worker-members of the co-op than, for example, the nation-wide Co-operative Group consumer-owned corporate structure.

A fourth ideological tension that stands out is that between the strong consumer co-operative network and the struggling producer or worker co-operatives. At the outset there seemed to be a seamless continuum between co-operative production, co-operative wholesale and co-operative retail. As Wilson et al. (2013) explain,

> The Wholesale saw itself as a commercial intermediary between producer and consumer co-operatives, purchasing goods from the former to sell to the latter. It also tried to help producer co-operatives by providing loans and credit through the CWS Bank. In the 1870s, there were a number of experimental co-operatives in coal mines and engineering, possibly the most famous of which was the Ouseburn Engineering Works on Tyneside (Wilson, Webster and Vorberg-Rugh, 2013, p.80).

However, when many worker-owned co-operatives started to fail, the CWS stood in to take over and wrote off their debt to the CWS Bank (Wilson, Webster and Vorberg-Rugh, 2013, p.80). It was evident that while the consumer co-operative movement was moving from strength to strength, and managed to survive even the stale years of the second half of the twentieth century, workers' and producers' co-operatives were finding it much harder to take off. The efforts of the CWS to help the worker-owned co-operatives to become a sustainable partner in creating a co-operative economy had not

paid off. The solution which the consumer co-operative movement adopted was that of going it alone, becoming itself a producer through its own factories, owned not by workers but by the consumers. In Britain, the co-operative movement eventually became synonymous with consumer co-operation. Over the years the CWS sold its production plants and in the second half of the twentieth century concentrated its efforts always more on the retail business. It did not have any interest in buying out workers' co-ops in difficulty as it did in the first half of the century. The consumer co-operative movement and the workers' co-operative do not seem to have had any interest in working together. A significant development occurred in 2001 when the Co-operative Union, representing the consumer co-operative movement, and the Industrial Common Ownership Movement, representing the smaller workers' co-operatives, merged into Co-operatives UK to represent the whole British co-operative movement. In the words of Bibby (2014, no pagination), Co-operatives UK was "bringing together consumer and worker co-operatives for the first time in almost a century" (See also Atherton, 2014, and Monaghan and Ebrey, 2012, p.71). It seems that the movement in Britain could not afford to have two parallel organisations representing two different strands of co-operation; the struggle to survive in an economic environment that favours investor owned enterprises over democratically owned and managed ones was forcing the movement to close quarters.

Despite the ideological contradictions, the development of the co-operative movement in Britain was also marked by signs of unity and mutual help between its different components. Wilson et al. (2013) posit that despite the different aims of the Co-operative Union and the CWS, they both enjoyed a very good working relationship in the second half of the nineteenth century, stating that

> relations between the two bodies were reasonably amicable and collaborative, with close joint work in the field of promoting the spread of co-operation through the joint propaganda committee (Wilson, Webster and Vorberg-Rugh, 2013, p.70-71).

For its part the Co-operative Union supported the committees of local societies affiliated to the CWS with educational pamphlets, enticing them to invest in the education of their members and of their children. It also forged collaborative relations with the Workers' Educational Association and the National Council of Labour Colleges to provide adult education courses for members of local co-operative societies. It was also represented on the Council of Ruskin College since its foundation in 1899

(Robertson, 2010, p.121-122). The CWS and the Co-operative Union were also co-founders of the International Co-operative Alliance, taking the notion of federalism from the national to the international sphere. In a congress of the Co-operative Union held in Rochdale in 1892 delegates resolved to set up "an international alliance of the friends of co-operative production". Support was rallied on the continent and a first international congress was held at Crystal Palace in London in 1893 with a view to bringing together representatives of consumer, producer, agricultural and banking co-operatives from different parts of the world. In this conference the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) was born (Birchall, 1997, p.40-41).

3.6   Fighting for survival: occupying the moral high ground in the quest for legitimacy

In making the case for the uniqueness of co-operatives as a business model that sets it apart from investor-owned capitalist models, Majee and Hoyt (2011) refer to the ethical attributes of the model rather than to the money-making mechanisms. The authors argue that the

> cooperatives' business structure allows them to be more society-oriented, [...] promote development that is not only society-centred [...] but is also democratic and people-centred (Majee and Hoyt, 2011, p.52).

It is on this redeeming factor that the consumer co-operative movement banked in order to face the stiff competition from capitalist competitors. In the retail sector of The Co-operative Group, food labelling was developed in a way to educate consumers by providing important nutrition information. Similarly, no supplies were bought from South Africa in a bid to join the boycott of the South African apartheid regime. Another important policy was the gradual shift towards the mainstreaming of fair-trade products. As part of this policy, by 1996 all the CWS's coffee and chocolate brands were certified as fair-trade (Wilson, Webster and Vorberg-Rugh, 2013, p.323-324). A National Opinion Survey in 2007 named the Co-op Brand as the most ethical in the UK. The result of these policies was that the membership of the Co-operative Group soared from 1.1 million to 7 million in 2012 (Wilson, Webster and Vorberg-Rugh, 2013, p.363). The Co-operative Group seemed to have gone through the 2008 financial crackdown largely unscathed. However, midway through the second decade of the new

millennium, something seems to have gone wrong. A hole in the bank's finances apparently resulting from The Co-operative Bank's taking over of the Brittania Building Society, resulted in the bank's need to make recourse to American hedge funds to survive bankruptcy, resulting in the bank being only 30% owned by the Group, with losses being reported for the Group as a whole risking losing control over its various operations. The very notion of consumer co-operation started in Rochdale in 1844 suddenly seemed to crumble. Once again it was the recourse to the moral high ground that was posited to be the saving force. An independent reviewer was brought in to review the Group's operations, proposing a competence-based national board that was also elected through a more transparent and democratic process, a call that was also backed by Unite, the trade union which represented 1,200 workers from the Group's retail operations (Neate, 2014A, no pagination). While reports in *The Guardian* spoke of possible meltdown (Neate, 2014B, no pagination), The Co-operative Bank's internet portal still harked back to the ethical stance by vouching to give £25 for charity for every new bank account (The Co-operative Bank, 2014, no pagination). Some members called for a rallying of individual and corporate members such as NGOs to buy back the bank and relocate it safely in the hands of member owners (Fensom, 2014, p.29). In the meantime, Steve Murrells, who led The Co-operative Group's retail sector, contended that the group's profitability could be secured by making recourse to the values that were the heart and soul of the Rochdale Equitable Pioneers: "Stores don't have to be a profit centre [...] You could put everything back into a community and create a virtuous cycle" (Wood, 2014, no pagination). The signs are that the consumer co-operative movement in Britain will be able to survive yet another onslaught.

3.7   Conclusion

In this chapter we have seen how the distinguishing feature of co-ops within a capitalist economic model is that they are democratically owned and controlled by communities. The tension they have to solve is between occupying the moral high ground as a more ethical form of meeting people's basic needs and at the same time to survive in a hostile largely neo-liberal capitalist economy.

Robert Owen and William King provided the ideological backbone for a grassroots co-operative movement that provided an emergent alternative to capitalist

hegemony; Owen provided the model of villages of co-operation while King promoted self-help community-based co-ops. While the first were meant to be citadels developing apart from capitalism, the second were meant to be a more natural development within existing local communities and neighbourhoods, enabling communities to dare to organise themselves differently by creating their own 'crowd-funded', 'crowd-owned' and 'crowd-managed' economic and political responses to their own needs. I argued that the Rochdale Pioneers found the right formula to make Owen's, but mostly King's, ideas work. Setting up their community store on clearly laid-out management principles they intertwined the ability to satisfy the community's everyday needs, democratic shared ownership and management of the venture, and the sustainable profitability of the business. The Rochdale principles show that members had learned from past experiences not only to read the word but also to read the world in the sense that they had acquired and later created technical knowledge that enabled them to come up with collective, unorthodox, pragmatic and effective solutions to everyday problems.

Within fifty-five years the number of consumer co-ops spiralled to 1,400. But the law makers were slow to respond to accommodate this new development in British economy. In its claim for legitimacy and acknowledgement, the movement had to put pressure on the political class to create the legal space where an emergent alternative business model could operate.

I have also identified several tensions that have developed within the co-operative movement in Britain. First, the tension between the centre and the periphery, as the consumer co-op movement developed a federative structure that resulted in the formation of The Co-operative Group. This development aimed at enabling local co-operative stores to find the right balance between being able to respond to communities' daily needs and ensuring profitability. On the other hand this consolidation of federative structures led the consumer co-operative movement to reify itself into a conventional corporation not very different from others fighting for customers on the high street. This seemed to rob off the movement from its oppositional stance to ruthless capitalism, turning it into a mere alternative to other not very different corporate emblems of national and global homogenised capitalism. The tension between community and corporation, between local democracy and centralised managerial diktat, between consumer co-ops as part of the wider labour

movement and consumer co-ops as very conventional employers, and between the stronger and more visible consumer co-operative movement and the smaller workers' co-operatives movement, all reveal a co-operative ideological dialectic within a non-monolithic movement. It is a movement that at times fosters a diversity of responses to the needs communities feel under the hold of liberal and neo-liberal capitalism (consumer co-ops, workers' co-ops, credit unions, community-based co-ops, corporate structures). At other times it closes quarters, seeking greater strength, visibility and consensus in the face of other hegemonically acknowledged ways of doing business (the Co-operative Union, Co-ops UK, and the International Co-operative Alliance). It is a movement that started off as an outright oppositional force to capitalism, but along the years had established an ambivalent relationship with capitalist forces up to the ironic situation where American hedge funds came to the rescue of the unethically managed Co-operative bank to save it from bankruptcy, jeopardising all that co-operation stood for in the public eye.

In the next chapter I will explore how this alternative business model was propagated in the British Empire as part of a colonial policy of promoting local development in the colonies. I will then focus upon the way the model was exported to the island colony of Malta and how the Maltese co-operative movement developed its own ways of responding to the island's economic and political needs as it moved from colonisation to independence and to EU membership.

Chapter 4

The co-operative model in the British Empire: Spurring growth from below by providing a model from above

4.1   Introduction

In Chapter 3 we have seen how working class communities set up co-operatives in their neighbourhoods as a grassroots initiative to collectively address their shared needs. We have also seen how the new bottom-up socio-economic development had to struggle for acknowledgement from the political class that was slow to respond to this emergent development in community organisation from below, dragging its feet to create the necessary legal frameworks and provide a regulatory space for the smooth running of community-based co-operatives.

The spread of co-operation in the British Empire followed a diametrically opposed development. Co-operation as an organisational tool was hijacked by the British colonial authorities and used in a top-down process that was meant to organise, rationalise and maximise agricultural production in the colonies. It mainly aimed at providing a workable solution to the need of weaning off colonial economies from dependency on British financial support. Thus, while in Britain the setting up of co-operatives by working class communities preceded the enacting of a regulatory law, in the colonies the legal framework was created first and then used as a mechanism to promote, create and control co-operatives. Consequently, while British consumer co-operatives were fiercely independent from the state, in the colonies co-operatives were frequently at the mercy of the state, in need of guidance and organisational and financial support. At the base line, while the initial co-operative development in Britain was an emergent grassroots cultural development in oppositional reaction to a devastating, hegemonically placed, industrial capitalism, in the colonies it became an

expression of imperial domination and control. At best it was, in Freirean terms, 'assistencialism' (Freire, 1998, p.16), or in terms borrowed from Shaw and Martin, providing a 'structure' pretty well robbed of its 'agency' (Shaw and Martin, 2000, p.403). Or as the Maltese academic Godfrey Baldacchino (1994) states with particular reference to Malta, a co-operative development shorn of a co-operative ideology (Baldacchino, 1994, p.509)

In this chapter I will review the enactment of the first major co-operative law in Britain's largest colony, India, and its proliferation to other parts of the empire. Finally I will consider in some detail the development of co-operation in Malta, from the implementation of a co-operative ordinance in Malta by the lieutenant governor of the island to the present day. I will argue that the results of the implementation of the first colonial co-operative law in Malta were not very different from those of its implementation in India forty years earlier. I will delve into how a more independent co-operative movement slowly took roots on the island, with some parts within it slowly appropriating the co-operative model and supporting it with their own ideology of co-operation. I will finally argue that notwithstanding this development, government, and therefore hegemonic power, was never greater than at present, and this in the face of a clear-cut schism between traditional co-operatives and the new workers' co-operatives. I will argue that this sorry state of affairs can prove to be the right moment for people who subscribe to co-operation and whatever it stands for to reflect on what co-operation can mean to Maltese communities at present. I will discuss this against the backdrop of the unfolding history of a small nation-state that within the span of fifty years moved from independence, to the adoption of a Republican constitution, to the closing down of the British military base, to consolidating its democratic institutions and diversifying its economy, to finally becoming a thriving member state of the European Union.

4.2   Turning co-operation on its head: was it co-operation to transgress or co-operation to comply in British colonial India?

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* Freire (1990) argues that "It would be a contradiction in terms if the oppressors not only defended but actually implemented a liberating education" (Freire, 1990, p.30). Similarly, it would be outright contradictory if the British colonial authorities imposed the liberating ideology of co-operation upon their

subjects around the globe in order to liberate them. Rhodes (2012) makes the interesting analogy between the British empire at its height, and the Roman empire, arguing that "Just as the Roman Empire provided a framework in which Christianity could spread, so will we find that the British Empire provided similar opportunities for co-operation" (Rhodes, 2012, p.71). As argued in the previous chapter, hegemony can never be total and thus, there will be always uncontrolled or contested spaces where people will find elbow room for action outside the grasp of the dominant culture. Thus, while the kind of co-operation exported by the colonial authorities to the colonies must have been shorn of the ideological cement that kept the movement together in Britain for a century and a half, it also unwittingly disseminated the idea that there are other alternative ways how people can organise themselves to cater for their shared needs.

The first co-operative legislation in the British Empire was passed in 1890 in Barbados, in relation to the sugar cane industry on the island (Rhodes, 2012, p.98). However, the first significant co-operative law in the colonies was passed in India. Failing monsoon rains led to heavy indebtedness among the agricultural land-owning classes in the last decades of the nineteenth century. To remedy the situation British officials serving in India were sent to Europe to report about the way thrift and credit societies functioned there, with the aim of promoting similar societies in India (Rhodes, 2012, p.119, Műnkner, 2006, p.3). This paved the way for the enacting of the 1904 Co-operative Act which introduced two fundamental things. First, it provided a framework for the setting up of thrift and credit societies on the German Raiffeisen model among urban and rural communities. In the middle of the nineteenth century Friedrich Raiffeisen helped develop a network of co-operative banks in Germany mainly to support farmers, based on the principles of "self-help, self-administration and self-responsibility" (Coppola, 2015, no pagination). Secondly it provided a framework for the governance and monitoring of these co-operatives through the institution of the office of the registrar, with an extensive administrative network in every Indian state. This was part of a number of reformist laws enacted by the British in India in the time of the governor-general Earl Minto (Rhodes, 2012, p.116, Judd, 1993, p.8).

Rhodes (2012) notes that while both the British and the Indian regulatory frameworks were managed by a chief registrar, registrars and assistant registrars, in India the registrars' offices had much greater staffs, given their educational role. Registrars had to educate their staff in co-operative principles and in the practical

implementation of the law. Secondly registrars had to educate the management committees of co-operative societies in working within a business model that was alien to Indian culture. They also had to educate local communities to abide by co-operative regulations as entrenched in the co-operative law (Rhodes, 2012, p.129).

Rhodes (2012) is quite positive in her assessment of the introduction of co-operatives in India through the enactment of a law by the colonial administration. Notwithstanding the paradoxical juxtaposition of co-operative democracy and British imperialism, Rhodes argues that the Indian legal model managed to make inroads in Indian society. She reports that

> In 1906-7 843 societies were formed with a combined membership of 90,844. By 1911-12 members had risen to 8,177 and 403,328 respectively. This was a successful beginning but its significance extended far beyond India. The model it pioneered was replicated in Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Malaya (Malaysia), Cyprus and Africa (Rhodes, 2012, p.130).

Madhav Madane (2006), an Indian co-operative scholar, corroborates Rhodes's positive opinion, arguing that co-operatives have managed to foster local development in a way that goes beyond agricultural production and that has contributed to economic development, leading local communities to enjoy a better quality of life, implying a paradigm shift from a state driven co-operative movement to one driven by empowered local communities in search of co-operative solutions to their problems. In Madane's words,

> Some of the co-operatives in India, especially those in the processing sector, have been instrumental in transforming entire townships and surrounding villages into healthy co-operative communities. For example, several case studies have revealed that the sugar co-operatives have created roads, water management systems, irrigation canals, started health centres and hospitals, opened schools and colleges and provided facilities for social events, gyms, organized training facilities for music and other fine arts and even organized an orchestra of their own. Co-operatives have helped get better returns for sugarcane growing farmers and have provided employment to people working in all of the above activities, thereby creating a new paradigm in co-operative development (Madane, 2006, p.16).

However, Rhodes quotes the same Madane to argue that one of the key factors that helped co-operation to bring about positive changes in people's lives notwithstanding its being imposed from above by the colonial authorities was the fact that in certain parts of India such as the state of Bombay, the spread of co-operatives

is mainly attributed to the efforts and devotion of non-official leaders. These leaders who were already active in the socio-economic field, seized upon the opportunity of starting credit co-operatives when the 1904 Act was enacted (Madane, quoted in Rhodes, 2012, p.129-130).

It must have been these "unofficial leaders" who enabled people to subscribe to the ideology of co-operation, rather than the Registrar. The former were part of the colonised and may have seen co-operation as a way out of financial hardship and colonial political oppression. The latter was an expression of British colonialism, a civil servant at the service of the empire.

The German scholar Műnkner is much more critical than Rhodes and argues that

> The Indian Co-operative Credit Societies Act can be classified as a "development law". It was not a mirror of social and economic reality prevailing in India, regulating the current state of affairs and providing for the resolution of potential conflicts, but rather a law meant to serve as an instrument for achieving or encouraging the achievement of an envisaged (planned) result, namely the formation of rural and urban co-operative societies of the Raiffeisen type, different from existing autochthonous self-help organisations in many ways (Műnkner, 2006, p.5).

One of the differences highlighted by Műnkner is that while the co-operative model promoted by the law was based on the Rochdale principle of a one-person-one-vote, Indian society was more accustomed to managing by consensus (Műnkner, 2006, p.5). This was compounded by illiteracy problems among people who had to keep records, accounts and correspondence as pointed out by Rhodes herself (Rhodes, 2012, p.129). It is quite clear that while the Rochdale Pioneers banked upon their previous technical knowledge in trade and also in social and political activism, in order to come up with an innovative, non-conventional but working solution to their economic needs, this was not the case in India. Here the participants on the ground lacked the basic knowledge to make the imported co-operative credit union model work, even in its basic administrative procedures.

Műnkner further points out that over the years the registrar's role in India metamorphosed from one of education, support and supervision to one of intervention and control. The Indian Act allowed for co-operatives to enjoy favourable tax regimes as well as access to government funds. This would engender functional dependency on state aid. But on top of it all, co-ops had to be accountable to the registrar who had to

make sure that state funds were not abused or siphoned off. Consequently the registrar enjoyed statutory powers emanating from the law, such as the right to register or liquidate co-operatives, or to arbitrate in case of disputes. However, the registrar also developed non-statutory powers, that crept in and became standard practice, such as making unannounced inspections, attending general meetings and influencing what went on during the meetings (Műnkner, 2006, p.9-10). A second Act was introduced in 1912 in order to regulate other forms of co-operatives besides thrift and credit societies. It also extended the scope of the registrar's powers who now had the final word on who could be admitted into a co-operative (Rhodes, 2012, p.129). This exacerbated the problem of dependency on the registrar's office and put into question the very fundamental Rochdale principle of co-operatives as voluntary organisations.

This would make one ask to what extent the 'educational' role of the Registrar was, in a matter of fact, a 'pedagogic' one in the sense meant by Gramsci when he argued that institutions within civil society have a 'pedagogic' role in subtly instilling the hegemonic value system among the population in order to ensure consensus to dominant forms of power (Gramsci, 2007b, p.1331). In this sense, as argued by Műnkner, the role of the registrar was more one of control, seeking consensus to pre-established colonial development programmes albeit through a new organisational model.

That the British co-operative laws of 1904 and 1912 introduced the concept of co-operation in India with some benefit for a number of local communities can be objectively accepted as fact, noting Madane's caveat above, about the pre-existing knowledge and commitment of local leaders towards local community activism. That co-operation as a tool for local development was not meant to disturb the political balance of power in British India is, however, equally certain. Judd (1993) argues that there were times when British legislation was seen as reformative, at other times as a tokenistic recognition of Indian loyalty, such as that shown by the Indians towards Britain during the First World War. But there were no qualms as to who was master and who was serf in India. As Judd explains, while reformative laws, such as the co-operative laws of 1904 and 1912 showed the positive side of British imperialism, "like Dr Jekyll, the British Raj could also demonstrate the brutalities of Mr Hyde," citing the Amritsar massacre of 400 peaceful Sikh protesters in 1919 as an example (Judd, 1993, p.9). Co-operation in India was not a tool for freedom from the dominant British ideology of empire. I started off this section by quoting Freire with regards to the

inherent contradiction in expecting the oppressors to set in motion processes that would liberate the oppressed. With particular reference to India at the beginning of the twentieth century Judd reflects that, faced with the Amritsar massacre, the young Jawaharlal Nehru could only realise that "freedom could never be guaranteed as a gift, but could only be achieved through a determined and comprehensive struggle" (Judd, 1993, p.10).

4.3   Exporting the Indian model to other parts of the empire

Rhodes (2012) explains how the Indian model legislation was introduced into other parts of the British Empire. Co-operative legislation was enacted in the different settler states in southern Africa between 1904 and 1910. Under these legal frameworks several co-operatives were set up by British and European settlers. According to Rhodes these co-operatives were largely unsuccessful, with little government supervision, poor management and unsustainable financial policies; most became insolvent (Rhodes, 2012, p.142). Notwithstanding this, a new law was passed in 1922 in the Union of South Africa, subsequently amended by a later Act in 1925, giving extensive powers to the Minister in charge of co-operatives. Fines were to be imposed on farmers who did not sell their produce through their co-operative. In districts where seventy-five per cent of producers were part of a co-operative, even non-members were constrained to sell their produce through the co-operative and were bound by the statute of a co-operative of which they were not even members (Rhodes, 2012, p.142-143). This ran contrary to the very notion of co-operation as perceived by the Rochdale Pioneers since nobody can be forced to co-operate. If people do not subscribe to the ideology of co-operation, the co-operative model cannot be imposed upon them from above. In Deweyan philosophy, community is the result of the will of those who come together. The zenith is reached when the community develops democratic ways of managing itself ensuring that free communication within the group fosters growth at individual and collective level. Forcing people to act together following pre-established rules decided upon within what Gaventa calls 'closed spaces' (Gaventa, 2005, p.12) is simply a contradiction.

Birchall (1997) writes that the British-Indian model influenced the development of co-operation in other parts of the African continent under British rule, including Botswana, Gambia, Lesotho, Mauritius, Nigeria, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Kenya

and the protectorate of Egypt. It was used by European settlers as has happened in the South African states that were later to form the Union of South Africa. But as Birchall argues, it was also used by the colonisers as

> an instrument to maintain the existing relations, to introduce the natives gradually into the externally controlled, export-oriented money economy, and to develop local, modernised, indigenous structures (Birchall, 1997, p.133).

> Or, as Mayo put it, these "were being seen as part of this strategy – 'to attempt to create plausibly democratic institutions without serious dislocation of the vested interests of the status quo' (Mayo, 1975)" (Mayo, 2016, p. 10).

The ideology of co-operation had started off as an ideology to empower local communities to engage with capitalist economic and political developments that were negatively affecting their lives, enabling them to build structures that would give shape and substance to their struggles. In the hands of the colonial office, the co-operative structure was emptied of its ideological essence and used as a domesticating mechanism that would familiarise the natives with global economic structures of which the empire itself was an eminent expression.

Co-ops set up within this paradigm could only foster domination and control, not learning and growth. However, as happened in India, there was a flip side to this. Domination and hegemony can never totally control social reality and some native populations used the co-operative model as a tool to claim spaces for political action. Egypt was a case in point.

Egypt became semi-independent from Britain in 1922, after a struggle led by Saad Zaghlul and his *Wafd* party, a struggle which saw Zaghlul being exiled first to Malta and later to the Seychelles (Bisgaard-Church, 2011, no pagination). In 1923 a co-operative law was enacted in Egypt. The situation that developed was not very different from that in India in terms of government's interference in the running of the co-operatives and in channelling government state aid to the co-operatives operating largely in the agricultural sector (Rhodes, 2012, p.218). However, Birchall argues that while the registrar's office would usually be the moving force for the setting up and monitoring of co-operatives, a native leadership slowly took over the management. Ultimately, native-run co-operatives in Egypt were used as a political expedient to foster a nationalistic spirit within the movement for independence (Birchall, 1997, p.133-135).

A unique situation developed in Palestine under the British mandate. In 1920 the British administration introduced the Co-operative Societies Ordinance based on the Indian model. However, the co-operative movement had two different parallel developments, one on the Jewish side and one on the Arab. Jewish co-operation was an overtly ideological, political and pragmatic tool for "claiming back" the land of Israel. Birchall argues that the *kibbutz* version of the co-operative model enabled settlers to organise a very efficient, export-oriented agricultural sector that was to become one of the economic pillars of the new state of Israel (Birchall, 1997, p.174). Rhodes (2012, p.222) argues that the *kibbutz* system originated from the Soviet *kolhoz*, or collective farms. The basic difference between the two models was that Russian farmers were forced to make part of the *kolhoz* while Jewish settlers adopted the model voluntarily, as it enabled them "to settle the maximum number of members on the minimum area possible at minimum cost." On the other hand they were very similar to Owenite communities since

> No private property was held within them and everything the members produced went to the co-operative. On entering voluntarily members had to be prepared to work for and with the group to which all assets and liabilities belonged. Important decisions were made by the general meeting and implemented by committee (Rhodes, 2012, p.222).

On the other hand Palestinian co-operatives were fewer in number, mainly in the agricultural sector and like in Egypt and India, very dependent on state aid. A new law was enacted in 1933 which provided for a registrar that would promote co-operatives among Arabs and also monitor and audit operations. By the end of 1939 there were 1,081 Jewish co-operatives including *kibbutz* but also co-ops in an array of economic sectors, and twenty-four Arab societies (Rhodes, 2012, p.220).

> Very similarly, Rhodes (2012) recounts how the Cypriot movement was
>
> a government prompted movement. Its growth began with the passing of the Co-operative Credit Societies Law in 1914. This was only ten years after India's first Co-operative Credit Societies Act and it is tempting to speculate how far that legislation inspired the Cypriot version (Rhodes, 2012, p.223).

The Cypriot co-operative movement took off with the setting up of rural, community-based, thrift and credit societies just as it did in India. Its purpose was to offer small farmers credit in order to invest in their farms, incentivizing development and liberating small farmers from the hold of local usurers. The first co-operatives acted principally as agents of the Agricultural Bank, with very little co-operation going

on at grassroots level (Rhodes, 2012, p.223). The law was revised in 1935 in order to provide for the setting up of a department for co-operatives. As a result of this re-organisation at central level, in 1937 a Co-operative Central Bank was created, endorsed by seventy-one co-operatives and with financial support from Barclays Bank (Rhodes, 2012, p.224). The main purpose of the bank was

> the provision of banking and other ancillary services to member co-operative societies which form the backbone of the agricultural community of Cyprus. Over the years the Bank has seen the need to expand and diversify its activities and is now in a position to provide the full range of services normally offered by comprehensive rural banks. The establishment of the Bank was a major event and turning point in the development of the Co-operative Movement and has proved instrumental in eradicating the then prevalent usury and exploitation of farmers. Its progress has been rapid and its success beyond the expectation of the pioneers of the Co-operative Movement (The Co-operative Central Bank, (Cyprus), no date, no pagination).

The Co-operative Central Bank also involved itself in "the importation and distribution of commodities such as fertilisers, sulphur and seed potatoes to its member societies" (Rhodes, 2012, p.225). As Műnkner (2006, p.5) had argued about the Indian co-operatives law, this was a development initiative more than one of devolving democratic power to local communities. Co-operative development in Cyprus, like elsewhere in the empire, was very much influenced by the registrar. He was a civil servant very much endeared to the idea of co-operation, B.J. Surridge. He was very active during his term of office from 1934 to 1943 (Rhodes, 2012, p.225). Surridge's influence on the development and proliferation of the co-operative model in the empire soon spread to Malta, the last corner of the empire where the co-operative model was to be implanted.

4.4   Malta: from fortress colony to independent state

In 1919 Malta had its own dead at British hands to mourn. It was no Amritsar; four protesters were shot dead by Royal Marines during protests mainly against rising bread prices. But it just goes to show where real power lay. Malta had come within British influence in 1799, a year after Napoleon Bonaparte docked in Malta and put an end to 268 years of rule by the Knights of St. John. The British came to Malta as envoys of the King of Naples in order to help the insurgent local population to oust the French garrison. In 1814 Malta formally became a British colony. The British governed the island mostly through direct rule, with the governor sharing some very limited

responsibilities with an elected council from the middle of the nineteenth century onwards. Partly as a result of the 1919 uprisings, a new constitution was given as a result of which, in 1921, Malta elected its first prime minister, Joseph Howard, and its own parliament responsible for local affairs. In 1933, when the pro-Italian *Partito Nazionalista* was leading the executive, the British suspended the constitution fearing a Trojan horse in the face of the Fascist threat from neighbouring Italy. Malta reverted to direct rule. From 1939 onwards Malta had a council of government composed of ten nominated official members and ten elected members and was led by the lieutenant governor. The island was heavily bombarded during the War. By that time the Maltese economy had become heavily dependent on British military expenditure. On the other hand the emerging political leaders, Dom Mintoff on the Malta Labour Party side and George Borg Olivier on the Nationalist Party side, pressed for political freedoms. On the 30th of December 1957 the historic 'Break with Britain resolution' was passed in Parliament, proposed by Labour Prime Minister Mintoff and seconded by the Leader of the Opposition Borg Olivier.

The colonial authorities were reducing jobs at the military and naval establishments and were not ready to subsidize the Maltese government's budget. As a result Mintoff tendered his resignation on the 21st of April 1958. This was followed by a general strike organised by the General Workers Union, a strong ally of Labour (see Pirotta, 2001, p.13-17). Riots broke out and the island reverted back to direct British rule. In the meantime, thousands of Maltese were emigrating to Australia, the United States and Canada. Buttigieg (1990) recounts how

> about 8,000 people were emigrating each year, most of them healthy male workers in their prime, and in Malta remained the elderly, women and children [...]. In 1954 emigration went up to 11,000 per year (translated from Buttigieg, 1990, p.18-19).

New elections were held in 1962. Borg Olivier became prime minister and negotiated for independence that was granted in 1964. His greatest task was to create an alternative economy to make up for the job losses at the military establishments. Frendo (1989) argued that

> By 1969 emigration reached rock bottom, return migration grew, settlers came to Malta from overseas. The economy boomed, creating problems of a different kind in its wake. But these were not so much problems of freedom as of economic well-being and learning to live together and to pull through: there was no repression whatsoever (Frendo, 1989, p.230).

In 1971 Mintoff became Prime Minister again. What followed was a period of political, social and economic reforms that took Malta by storm. Mizzi (1995) argues that Mintoff's socialism

> turned out to be more pragmatic than ideological: in social welfare it was most humane, and in economic matters the attempts at nationalisation applied mainly to what he termed "the heights of the economy", some of which, together with other important institutions, were then in the hands and under the control of foreigners. When Mintoff took office in 1971, such services as telecommunications, broadcasting, banking and air transport were British owned or run; and the subsequent nationalisation of these services was more a nationalist than a socialist act (Mizzi, 1995, p.96).

On taking office Mintoff demanded that the chief justice be appointed as Malta's first native Governor General. In 1972 he negotiated Malta's last defence agreement which set the 31st of March 1979 as the day when the British forces had to close down the military base. In 1974 he tabled amendments to the constitution to abolish the monarchy and set up the Republic of Malta. A new middle class took shape and an alternative economy was created, based on foreign direct investment in manufacturing industries and tourism. There was also a building spree, with housing estates mushrooming around many villages. The Dutch anthropologist Boissevain (1993) analysed this period and argued that

> With the exception of the period at the end of the 18th century which saw the replacement of the Knights by the French and the arrival of the British, no short period in Maltese history has seen greater change than the sixteen years of Labour government. Mintoff was a charismatic leader, but his style of government was abrasive and divisive. He was a tough-minded reformer in a hurry (Boissevain, 1993, p.152).

On the 31st of March 1979 the British forces left the island. Turbulent years of political turmoil followed but Mintoff secured an agreement with the Nationalist Party to amend the constitution to further protect parliamentary democracy.

In 1987 a Nationalist Prime minister, Eddie Fenech Adami, was voted into office with a very clear mandate, strengthening democracy and steering Malta towards the European Union. A hard-fought referendum decided the issue of EU membership and on the 1st of May 2004 Malta became a member of the EU together with the ex-British colony of Cyprus, and eight other countries. Contrary to what Labour had argued in the run up to the referendum, no catastrophe happened on EU accession. However, certain economic sectors did suffer the effects of the common market, first and foremost the

agricultural sector. Malta emerged unscathed during the 2008 financial crisis, largely thanks to a sound financial sector. However, there was a general feeling that the time was ripe for a change in government, a new impetus for the economy, a more critical voice in the European Council, and some fresh air in the local corridors of power. Having governed Malta from 1987 to 2013, with a very short interlude between 1996 and 1998, the Nationalist party had grown tired in power. Mintoff died in 2012, aged ninety-six. Labour won a landslide victory in the elections held in May 2013. Being the southernmost member of the EU, at the centre of the Mediterranean and in close proximity to troubled Libya, with growing Chinese influence in the region, a booming economy but with no clear evidence that the gap between rich and poor is actually being reduced, it seems that Malta's future depends on a fine balancing act.

4.5 Sowing the Indian seed on a Mediterranean island: transplanting the colonial co-operative model from the biggest to the smallest British colony

It is against this backdrop of transition from fortress colony to European membership, from direct British rule to parliamentary democracy, and from an economy dependent on British military spending to one built on a diversified economy, that we must consider the development of Maltese co-operatives.

A first experiment in co-operative organisation took place in the Grand Harbour town of Senglea. Around the year 1884 Engineer Angelo Caruana founded the *Società Operaia Cattolica San Giuseppe* with the aim of improving the living conditions of the workers who lived in the area, most of them employed in British naval and military establishments around the Grand Harbour. In 1887 the society changed its name to *Società Cooperativa Maltese*. Its aims were those of helping workers and their families through subsidies, free medical care and some form of pension (Galea, 2012, p.6-7). In the same town of Senglea, in 1919 or 1920, the Workers' Co-operative Society Ltd or *Società Anonima Operaia Cooperativa*, opened its own shops in *Strada Vittoria*. Galea links its foundation to the riots that had taken place across the Grand Harbour in Valletta in June 1919, arguing that the co-operative was a reaction to the price hikes that led to the riots. The scanty evidence suggests it was an initiative by a benevolent local leader who saw in co-operation a self-help organisational tool for the harbour community in the small walled town of Senglea. Galea mentions how this co-operative

aimed at offering food, clothing and crockery at affordable prices to its members (Galea, 2012, p.10). Baldacchino (1994) writes about the

> impressive story – again, still largely unresearched – of the Società Operaia Cattolica which, in August 1919, started operating a consumer cooperative. Within a year, this could boast over 400 members and was running a large retail outlet at 200-2, Victory Street, Senglea, employing in the process more than 30 employees (Baldacchino, 1994, p.518).

The same society in November 1929 published a notice on a local newspaper where its name is shown as *Società Operaia Cattolica L'Isla* (Galea, 2012, p.11). The scanty sources point to a Rochdale-model community-based consumer co-operative. Unfortunately little more is known about this community-based co-operative. It must have been one of a kind and its demise is practically unrecorded.

The next milestone in the development of the co-operative movement in Malta is cast in the same pattern that unfolded elsewhere in the British Empire. Baldacchino (1994) argues that

> the Maltese cooperative movement was ushered in specifically as a cost-saving, profit enhancing mechanism to boost agricultural efficiency and productivity. It involved no commitment to cooperative values and it was not inspired by a cooperative ideology (Baldacchino, 1994, p.509).

Evidence suggests that it was, once again, part of a centrally devised economic development programme that had nothing to do with fostering grassroots democracy. And this will explain the reasons why for decades the co-operative idea on the island was linked exclusively to agricultural co-operatives dependant on the state for financial and administrative support, linked to assistencialism rather than to self-help. The story line in Malta is quite predictable. In 1934 the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Sir Philip Cunliffe-Lister, sent Frank A. Stockdale to draw up a report about the situation of Maltese agriculture. In his report Stockdale commented on the lack of transparency in determining the price of agricultural produce, resulting in poor returns for the farmers. He suggested the reorganization of the agricultural sector by introducing marketing and grading systems. He also suggested a legal framework that would make provisions for the registration, monitoring and auditing of farmers' co-operative societies. This would have enabled England to import early crops cultivated on the island (Galea, 2012, p.13-16). It was not until 1943 that the local British administration sent Mr H. Hirst, acting Director of Agriculture, on a visit to Palestine to see how co-operatives worked there (Galea, 2012, p.20). Again in 1944 Mr W.K.H. Campbell, a co-operatives

registrar in Ceylon (Rhodes, 2012, p.263) visited Malta. He made a study of the situation in Malta in the aftermath of the Second World War (Galea, 2012, p.21) and suggested the setting up of co-operatives on the island. In the same year Dr Henry Sacco decided to visit Cyprus to study how co-operatives worked there (Galea, 2012, p.24). Sacco was one of the early members of the Malta Labour Party which was founded in 1921 (Zammit Marmarà, 2010, p.31-32) but had switched over to the Constitutional Party later to return to Labour. A dispatch from the Governor's office in Malta described him as "absolutely honest, intensely sincere and a great worker for the good of the poorer classes but he is lacking in discrimination" (Pirotta, 1987, p.32). Apparently Sacco's mission to Cyprus did not bear any fruits. There is no evidence of Sacco's involvement with co-operatives or with the dissemination of co-operation as an economic or political tool on the island beyond this point.

Again the story returns to the beaten path and predictably unfolds in a way that sees the local colonial administration sending a Maltese civil servant, Mr Oscar Paris, to study co-operatives in other parts of the British Empire. Sacco did not take this in his stride and before the mass resignation of the Maltese representatives on the Council of government in 1944, during a meeting of the Council of Government of the 17th of October 1944, he tabled a motion that condemned the government for spending money on sending Oscar Paris to Cyprus without, before that, seeing what Henry Sacco himself had written about his own visit to Cyprus, paid out of his own pockets. During the debate it was revealed that the British Government had first intended to send Mr Biasini, director of Agriculture, to Cyprus. But then it decided upon Mr Paris instead so that he would get an insight into the registrar's job. Oscar Paris was a 30-year-old Maltese civil servant with a B.Sc. in Horticulture from Reading University. Between August and October 1944, he spent thirty three days in Cyprus, twenty-nine days in Palestine and nine days in Egypt. On the 20th of January 1945 Paris presented a detailed report to the Lieutenant Governor entitled *A study of the Working of Co-operative Societies*. The report shows that Paris had met with about a hundred co-operatives, mostly in Cyprus and Palestine (Galea, 2012, p.21, 23, 25. See also Ganado, 1977, p.251). The report was sent to Agriculture departments and Co-operative registrars in other British Colonies by the Colonial Secretary. A copy was also sent to Sir W.H.K. Campbell who in the meantime had moved to Mauritius (Galea, 2012, p.25).

Meanwhile in London Attlee became Labour prime minister with a clear colonial policy based on "the dissolution of the British Empire and found a clear place

for co-operative development in colonies moving towards independence" (Rhodes, 2012, p.231). As Secretary of State for the Colonies, he appointed Arthur Creech Jones who had sat on a special committee established by the Fabian Society and which in 1945 had produced a document entitled *Co-operation in the Colonies*. Within the Colonial Office Creech Jones set up a co-operative advisory committee and in 1947 he appointed B. J. Surridge, the former co-operative registrar in Cyprus, as co-operative advisor (Rhodes, 2012, p.243). Soon after becoming Colonial Secretary Creech Jones met the leader of the Malta Labour Party, Paul Boffa, his deputy, Dom Mintoff and their other colleague Arthur Colombo, who were in London to try to find a solution after the ten elected members of the Council of Government in Malta had resigned en bloc. Later in 1945 fresh elections were held under the same constitution to give the National Assembly enough time to finalise its plans for a new constitution. In those elections Labour won nine of the ten seats; the Constitutional Party disbanded and the Nationalist Party was in disarray after most of its leaders had been deported to Uganda during the war. The other seat went to the Independent candidate Herbert Jones, who was elected from the constituency of Gozo after luring the farmers' votes on the island (Vella, 1989, p.49).

In the meantime, Mr Oscar Paris was given the go-ahead to act upon the report he had presented to the Lieutenant Governor. He was helped by Salvu Attard, known as *iċ-Ċinkwina*, from a farming family from Ħaż-Żebbuġ, who used his contacts with farmers in different villages in order to organise information meetings to explain to them the concept of primary co-operatives.

Műnkner (2006) argues that

> The Indian Co-operative Credit Societies Act and the government machinery devised for implementing this legislation became known as the "Classical British-Indian Pattern of Co- operation" (CBIPC). It was tested first in India as experimental legislation, applied in South Asia (Burma/Myanmar, Ceylon/Sri Lanka), spread in Africa in the 1930s and after the second world war it was recommended to the governments of all British dependencies as a Model Ordinance, supplemented by Model Rules (Műnkner, 2006, p.1).

He mentions how the Colonial office sent two consecutive dispatches to the colonial administrations in the colonies, the *Model Co-operative Societies Ordinance, Enclosure 2 to Circular Despatch dated 20th March, 1946, from the Secretary of State for the Colonies to the Colonial Governments, Col. No. 199, London 1946* and *Model Co-operative Societies Rules, Enclosure to Circular Despatch dated 23 April, 1946, from the Secretary of State for*

the Colonies to the Colonial Governments, Col. No. 199, London 1946 (Műnkner, 2006, p.1). The dispatches from London must have spurred the Lieutenant Governor Irish Unionist Sir David Campbell to act fast on Paris's report because in June of the same year he presented an Ordinance to the Council of Government known as Ordinance number XXXIV of 1946 that made provisions for the setting up of co-operatives. It was approved by the Council of Government and came into effect on the 12th of December of 1946. On that same date Oscar Paris was appointed first registrar of co-operatives in Malta aided by two inspectors (Galea, 2012, p.25).

The Ordinance enabled the registration of the community-based farmers' co-operatives that were taking shape in the villages thanks to Paris's and Attard's pioneering work. The first co-operative to be set up was Żabbar Co-operative Society Ltd. which presented its statute to Oscar Paris soon after he took office, on the 29th of December 1946. The official registration occurred on the 15th of January of 1947. The co-operative had seventy members from the village of Ħaż-Żabbar who had paid one share each of £5. On the 26th of February 1947 the Registrar approved the appointment of Salvu Gatt as the co-operative's first secretary with a pay of 14s 5d per working day (Galea, 2012, p.27-28). The second one to be set up was that of Manikata which brought together the farmers of the North Western rural area and adopted the name of St. Paul's Bay Co-operative Society Ltd. Others followed suit in Ħaż-Żebbuġ, Siġġiewi, Rabat, Ħad-Dingli and Ħal Qormi. Another co-operative was organised in Mellieħa, to the north of Manikata. In 1946 farmers from the Żebbiegħ area of Mġarr got together presumably on the instigation of Oscar Paris's team. On the 24th of July 1947 they registered their co-operative and on the 8th of March 1948 held their first general meeting (Baldacchino, 2007, p.2-3).

At the time, farmers sold their produce at three vegetable markets in Marsa, Birkirkara and Rabat. Some of the societies that were forming in 1946 got together to organise selling points at the markets in Marsa and Birkirkara. This co-operation led to a second important milestone. On the 8th of February 1947 representatives from the first six co-operatives set up a secondary co-operative, the Farmers' Central Co-operative Society (FCCS), with offices at the farmers' store in the Marsa market with the aim of organising the wholesaling of farmers' produce. The primary co-operatives also started buying fertilizer and animal feed in bulk and selling them to members (Galea, 2012, p.29, 35).

A positive development in the agricultural sector occurred in 1958 when milk producers came together to set up a co-operative. Discussions with government started in 1957 but were stalled because the only milk processing plant on the island insisted on dealing with farmers individually rather than with a corporate body. Finally a deal was brokered by the Maltese Government and on the 16th of June 1958 the Malta Milk Producers Co-operative Society Ltd (KPH) was registered (Galea, 2012, p.80-82). Similarly, in 1981, after a bout of African Swine fever had devastated most of Malta's pig farms, pig breeders came together to set up a co-operative in order to revive the industry. Work on the statute and on gathering support among members continued throughout 1982. In April 1983 the Pork Producers Co-operative (KIM) was formally registered with 159 members (Galea, 2012, p.144-145). The initiative was more on the producers' side than on the Government's and this shows in the fact that both KPH and KIM are today among Malta's largest co-operatives in terms of membership, turnover and market share.

Till late in the twentieth century very little progress was made to extend co-operation beyond agriculture and fisheries. In 1954 Oscar Paris left the office of registrar (Galea, 2012, p.62) and the office was integrated into the Agricultural department.

4.6   The co-operative model on the yet smaller island of Gozo: co-operation entangled in petty electoral feuds

On the island of Gozo the birth of the movement was further complicated when it got entangled in electoral controversy, putting farmers at the mercy of native manipulative middle class leaders. A Gozitan farmers' co-operative was registered in 1947 but it was caught in a personal battle between two local politicians, Henry Jones and Franco Masini (Galea, 2012, p.40-41). Jones was the only non-Labour elected member of the Council of Government elected in 1945. Pirotta (1987, p.47) says that he managed to get elected by garnering the support of the Gozo farmers. In the meantime a national assembly had managed to conclude its work and present a demand for a new constitution for Malta that would make provision for a 40-seat single house of parliament, with a cabinet of Ministers and Prime Minister to serve for a four-year term. For the first time franchise was to be universal for all men and women aged twenty-one and over. Elections were set for October of 1947. Soon on the island of Gozo

two parties started campaigning: the Jones Party led by Henry Jones and the Gozo Party led by lawyer Franco Masini. Jones registered the Gozo Agricultural Co-operative Society on the 25th of April 1947, (Galea, 2012, p.40) in the heat of the electoral campaign. He was a Maltese but

> courted Gozitans by promising to fight for: farmers' rights; better facilities for fishermen; the building of schools; the introduction of electricity to all parts of Gozo; free hospitalization; and better roads. A party organ, Il-Partit ta' Jones (The Jones Party) was launched, and Jones worked hard at spreading his message all over Gozo. He was well known on that Island, and his political position was rendered stronger by the fact that his co-operative had a monopoly on the distribution of pollard (Pirotta, 1987, p.93).

On the other hand Masini was a lawyer from Gozo who, in the run up to the elections, founded the Gozo Party with an electoral programme that vied with that of Jones, promising to

> safeguard the interests of farmers; build large water reservoirs; provide a veterinary surgeon in Gozo, and help farmers' co-operatives; promote the fishing, poultry, dairy and lace-making industries; build primary schools in every village; open a technical school; and to improve the medical service and public utilities (Pirotta, 1987, p.94).

Vella (1989) gives more flavour to the story, arguing that Henry Jones

> was able to fan hostilities between the village people against the professionals of the town of Victoria [the island's administrative and commercial centre]. In his meetings he very often uncovered their abuses [...] Jones was tooth and nail against the clique. He reminded people how professionals [lawyers, doctors, notaries, pharmacists] promise heaven on earth and then don't do anything. He accused the clique of leaving Gozo to rot (translated from Vella, 1989, p.132).

Franco Masini and his party represented this Victoria-based professional clique. Eventually in the 1947 elections Jones was elected to the first Maltese post-war legislative assembly together with another member of his party. The Gozo party elected three representatives, including Masini himself. Their claim to fame was short-lived; both parties disappeared from the Maltese political scene in the following elections held in 1950. In February 1947 the registrar, Oscar Paris, wrote to W.K.H. Campbell saying that he was very happy with the six Maltese co-operatives registered until then but not so happy with the Gozitan co-operatives whose origins were rooted in political bickering (Galea, 2012, p.45). During 1947 a number of farmers accused Herbert Jones, the chairman of the co-operative, of non-democratic leadership. They registered a law suit against him and they hired lawyer Franco Masini to represent them! This led to the

setting up of a second rival co-operative, the Gozo Farmers Co-operative Association (Galea, 2012, p.40-41).

4.7   Agricultural co-operatives: a sugary coating over unchanged individualism and dependency

While going about organising farmers' co-operatives, the office of registrar was well connected with co-operative developments in the British Empire. Apart from the meetings and correspondence with W.H.K. Campbell and B.J. Surridge, Oscar Paris also had contacts with the Plunkett Foundation which in 1948 asked Paris to produce a paper for their annual publication. Paris also made contacts with the Co-operative Union based in Manchester to acquire printed material to help disseminate co-operative ideas in Malta. He also acquired visual material from the ICA to be used with illiterate people. Other literature was donated by FAO (Galea, p.55, 59).

But the role of the registrar in Malta developed much in the same way it developed in India and elsewhere in the colonies. As Műnkner argued (Műnkner, 2006, p.9-10), even in Malta the registrar had statutory duties, such as registering the co-operatives after making sure they were viable and sustainable entities. But he also adopted non-statutory functions. Galea (2012) writes how FCCS was managed by a team of full-time employees, which soon after its foundation included a secretary and six clerks. But it is very clear that there was a lot of hand-holding by the Registrar in the running of FCCS. Paris sent out circulars to the committees of the eight primary co-ops to summon their delegates to FCCS central committee meetings (Galea, 2012, p.37). Three officers from the registrar's office had their time wholly taken up by

> giving instructions to members and employees of the co-operatives on the book-keeping system, checking of bills or payments, and on how they should hold and lead committee meetings. For this purpose, an officer would be present whenever a meeting was going to be held, even more so if there was going to be a general meeting where annual accounts would be presented and a new committee elected (Translated from Galea, 2012, p.47).

This must have been necessary, first of all, because like in other parts of the British Empire, the setting up of co-operatives was driven by the British colonial administration. The farmers, who were the first to get involved in the process, were enticed into co-operation by policy makers and not as a result of any consciousness raising process of themselves as an exploited class. The people they employed in the

administration of their co-operatives, then, lacked the technical knowledge related to co-operation as well as the commitment to the ideology of co-operation. Committees were made up of farmers who very often were enterprising individuals with hands-on practical agricultural knowledge but very little managerial or co-operative (in the literal sense) skills. Very often they were illiterate; they would also lack any knowledge of how to use the written and spoken word, either in Maltese or English, as a dialogical or political tool. The direct intervention of Oscar Paris and his staff in the day-to-day running of the farmers' co-operatives was inevitable and emblematic of the spirit in which co-operation was introduced on the island. The Maltese farmers, their representatives on the management committees, and their employees in the administration, had to 'learn' how to co-operate, how to run a profit-making co-operative, and how to balance the power of the farmers on the one hand, and the hired administrators on the other. It is also emblematic that a number of farmers' co-ops today are almost dormant. Many farming communities have failed to turn co-operation into a political expedient for community organisation and development. Most importantly, while agricultural co-ops within FCCS have had some influence on the way products are sold at the central fruit and vegetable market at Ta' Qali, they have had no influence whatsoever on the way family farms are run. To this very day, farmers guard their independence in the production phase of the process. Even though the pioneering farmers' co-ops were meant to be producers' co-ops, there has never been any attempt to co-ordinate production; co-operation at the wholesale phase of the process means that farmers who are members of the primary co-ops within FCCS have the option of unloading some or all of their produce at the FCCS shed at the market which operates as a middleman, sharing profits among the member co-ops. But in practice, most farmers have had to face the challenges of micro- and macro-economic changes as individuals rather than as members of a co-operative. I will discuss this point further in Chapter 6.

Farmers' co-operatives became a mainstay in the Maltese co-operative movement. Some of them merged, such as the Mellieħa co-operative, that merged with the Manikata-based St. Paul's Bay co-operative. Some of them ventured into consumer co-operation by setting up agricultural supplies stores for their members such as the ones in Ħaż-Żabbar, Rabat and Mġarr and had more success as consumer co-operatives rather than as producer co-ops. When the vegetable markets were centralised in one market at Ta' Qali, FCCS acquired a shed to compete with private middlemen. Galea

(2012) states that the greatest problem for the farmers' co-operatives was that of not finding efficient clerks that were able to manage the co-operatives' finances. Farmers' co-operatives had also failed to break the middlemen's monopoly since they still managed seventy-five per cent of the turnover at the three markets (Galea, 2012, p.70).

Godfrey Baldacchino (1994) painted a very bleak picture of agricultural co-operatives, arguing that research showed that within the primary co-ops that made up FCCS

> Farmer-members refuse to consider the cooperative's long-term interests in favour of maximising their own, short-term gains. There is a dearth of business acumen, as well as of the recognition for its need; hence there is often only a token investment in managerial skills. There is also an intermittent invasion of the spheres of competence of professional management by the farmer-members elected on the committee of management, which strains the organizational set-up and blurs respective responsibilities. In many cases, there seems to be a precipitous vicious spiral pointing menacingly towards dissolution (Baldacchino, 1994, p.511).

In 2014, ten years after Malta's accession to the EU and the consequent dismantling of all protective tariffs that have protected Maltese agriculture for centuries, the same primary farmers' co-operatives are still there, many of them maybe lame, and still keep on chanting what Baldacchino calls, "A litany of woes" (Baldacchino, 1994, p.511). The meltdown has not occurred yet. A ray of hope may be gleaned from the two case-studies that are the subject of this research. They are two co-operatives that in different historical circumstances have appropriated the co-operative model which had been handed down to them and turned it into a political tool, trying to reach different aims through different means and developing an endogenous co-operative ideology that addressed their needs.

4.8   Making co-operation work for the new nation state: other top-down attempts by central government to diversify co-operation

Contrary to what happened in Britain, efforts by Paris and his successors to promote consumer co-operation proved futile. Galea mentions attempts being made within the Civil Service, in Cospicua, Paola and Ħal Qormi but all were short lived (Galea, 2012, p.52-55). Today, the only consumer co-operatives active on the island are those run by some agricultural co-operatives that operate outlets providing their members with agricultural supplies. Another consumer co-operative is the *Koperattiva Kummerċ Ġust*

which was set up in 1996 to import fair-trade products and sell them locally. But the consumer co-operation movement is nowhere near its UK counterpart.

It also took decades for workers' co-operatives to gain some ground. In 1948 Paris registered the first workers' co-op, the Malta Tailors' Union Co-operative Society. It had a very short-lived history and was liquidated on the 27th of March 1959 (Galea, 2012, p.51, 69). In 1974 the General Workers Union (GWU) set up a cargo handling co-operative for stevedores at the Grand Harbour. The experiment was short lived. Baldacchino (1994) recounts how the "15 members, contrary to normal procedures, dissolved the coop and made off with all outstanding assets" (Baldacchino, 1994, p.512). The next attempts were mainly state sponsored but also with the involvement of the GWU. In 1983 twenty-one workers of Hospima Ltd, which produced safety clothing, took over their own firm and set up First Clothing Co-operative Society. In 1988 the co-operative was asked to pay for the land lease of the factory it was occupying but was not in a position to do so and folded up in October 1990. A similar experiment was the Kordin Clothing Co-operative with twenty-six workers which was given a small factory at Kordin Industrial estate by the Malta Development Corporation. Within two years the factory closed its doors due to lack of purchase orders (Galea, 2012, p.146). Baldacchino (1994) says that these two experiments were instigated by the GWU and the Malta Labour Party in government, describing them as

> 'twin' rescue companies, providing employment particularly to female workers made redundant from the recession hit textile industry. The coops operated on a 'cut, make and trim' basis, usually handling small orders on subcontracting terms (Baldacchino, 1994, p.512).

The fate of workers' co-operatives took a new twist when in the mid-1990s government came up with a scheme to incentivise public service employees to set up co-operatives, presumably using the co-operative solution to reduce the number of employees on the public pay roll. Two successful co-operatives were set up through this scheme. In 1996 thirty-two industrial workers from the road and traffic signs unit at the Works Department, formed a co-operative. The GWU helped in the initial discussions that regarded the use of premises and tools, the participation in tendering processes, conditions of work, and the contractual relationship between the co-operative and the Works Department. The *Koperattiva tat-Tabelli u Sinjali tat-traffiku*, Koptasin, was approved in October 1996 and is still active and thriving (Galea, 2012, p.184). A second co-operative, *Koperattiva* Linen Services, or Kols Ltd, took over

laundry services at the state hospitals and has managed to establish a monopoly in the provision and maintenance of linen to public and private health care institutions in Malta. By the turn of the century workers' co-operatives have become a more thriving model, enabling the co-operative movement to branch out into other sectors such as project management, human resource development, media productions, childcare, marine and port services, land transport and art restoration. It was immediately evident that workers' co-operatives that were set up on the voluntary initiative of founder-members, were bound to be more successful than those set up through the direct intervention of government, whether colonial or national. They were set up out of the voluntary action of workers, and had to rely on their own steam, fuelled mainly by their sense of agency, for financial sustainability. This was very different from the initial agricultural co-ops that found it extremely hard to be weaned off state aid over the span of almost seventy years.

Oscar Paris was also intent on founding a co-operative bank. In 1944 he had acquainted himself with the thrift and credit societies of Cyprus. Back in Malta he contacted the CWS Bank and in 1946 he also met B. J. Surridge, the Colonial Secretary's advisor for co-operatives, who was on an unofficial visit to Malta. They discussed possible ways that farmers could get access to credit facilities in order to be able to convert non-irrigated land into irrigated farmland. Discussions about the possibility of setting up a co-operative bank continued well into 1950 but were eventually abandoned in 1951 (Galea, 2012, p.46). The issue seems to have resurfaced in 2012 by a unilateral move of the minister responsible for co-operatives, Jason Azzopardi. While on a visit to the premises of *Koperattiva Rurali Manikata* to mark the international day of co-operatives on the 6th of July, the Minister mentioned how he had tabled a motion in Parliament to amend the co-operatives law to make provision for a co-operative bank. During his press conference he argued that a co-operative bank's main aim was not to make profits at all costs but to "safeguard the long-term wellbeing of its members." He also revealed that consultation meetings were held with the Malta Financial Services Authority and co-operative banks in Italy, saying that the latter were the least affected by the financial crisis of 2008 (Dalli, 2012). A half day seminar was eventually held on the 27th of September 2012 in conjunction between the Ministry of Fair Competition, Consumer Affairs and Small Businesses and the Italian Embassy in Malta with the participation of Italian experts (Ripard, 2012). Unfortunately Parliament was soon in a stalemate, Government failing to pass the budget law in November 2012.

Elections were called for March 2013 and Labour promised to "facilitate the setting up of a co-operative bank" in its electoral manifesto (Partit Laburista, 2013, p.44). However, the September conference that was attended also by Labour's future finance minister has so far not been followed up by any concrete steps towards the setting up of the co-operative bank. Oscar Paris's dream is still unfulfilled. I would wonder whether a successful Maltese Co-operative Bank will ever be set up if not through the initiative of the co-operatives themselves.

4.9   Developing the legal framework: laying the foundations for an autochthonous movement

When amendments to the constitution were made in 1974 to establish the Republic, article 20 was inserted stating that, "The State recognises the social function of co-operatives and shall encourage their development" (*Constitution of Malta*, p.9). The new economic realities of the 1970s brought with them the need for amendments to the 1946 Ordinance. In 1975 the Co-operatives Ordinance was amended. The officer of the registrar was abolished and the role was taken over by a Co-operatives Board made up of a chairperson and five members nominated directly by Government. The new Board which took office in April 1975 secured the help of Professor Hans Műnkner from Germany (Galea, 2012, p.113). Germany was at the time a very close partner of the Mintoff government in its bid to create an alternative economy in view of the impending closure of the British military base in March 1979. Műnkner came to Malta at least two times to help the Co-operatives' Board draft a new law which was eventually voted in Parliament in 1978. It was published in the Government Gazette in December 1978 and came into effect in April 1979. (Galea, 2012, p.133-135). Professor Műnkner visited Malta a number of times after the enactment of the new law to help the Co-operatives Board in its implementation.

The new law had the intention of giving the co-operative movement a better organisational set-up with transparent roles for three different entities. The first one was the Co-operatives Board, essentially a regulatory body.

Secondly the law made provisions for the setting up of an Apex organisation to function as a federation of co-operatives. It is very strange that the law passed under the Republican Constitution continued to follow the colonial mentality of spurring on the movement through top-down initiatives sanctioned by the law. One would have

expected that the initiative to set up a representative body of co-operatives would have come from the co-operatives themselves and not from the legislator. As expected years had to pass before the Apex organisation was set up. Galea reports how Romeo Formosa, a prominent figure in the co-operative movement who served as secretary of the Co-operatives Board, in 1995 called a meeting for representatives from co-operatives to set up an Apex organisation with representatives from every co-operative. After a lengthy process the founding members of Apex under the guidance of Romeo Formosa managed to convince the Co-operatives Board to register them as the Apex organisation in terms of the law of 1978 (Galea, 2012, p.192). In 2008 Apex changed its name to *Koperattivi Malta* (KM). This was the time when Apex was opening its doors to new co-operatives that were being set up in new economic sectors such as child care, accounting, media and management. A change in the name was needed to give the organisation the image of a movement that was trying to make the point that co-operatives were not only about farmers and fishermen but about an alternative business model that could thrive in the new economic scenario brought about by Malta's accession to the EU in 2004.

A third development was the setting up of the Central Co-operative Fund (CCF). Műnkner (2006) writes that in Singapore

> a Central Co-operative Fund was introduced in 1979, accumulated from annual contributions by co-operatives and used among other things to finance co-operative audit by the Singapore National Co-operative Federation (SNCF) (Műnkner, 2006, p.20).

The same Műnkner was involved in the drafting of the 1978 law that made provisions for the setting up of a similar Fund in Malta. The law exempted co-operatives from corporate income tax on surplus and stipulated that co-operatives should pay five per cent on the annual surplus to this Fund. The money accumulated there would be used to promote the co-operative ideal and to help co-operatives with support programmes. Galea (2012) reports that the Fund was actually set up in 1980 (Galea, 2012, p.139). It is governed by a board that is partly nominated by the Co-operatives Board and partly by delegates elected in a general meeting for representatives of co-operatives.

4.10 The ideology of co-operation versus filling the rich man's pockets: human fulfilment at the service of a growing but inequitable economy

The Maltese legal framework is today under the lens. A new co-operative law has been long in the making. A longish consultation period in 2012-2013 was supposed to lead to a new law that would give a new reinvigorated framework for co-operatives to flourish and to contribute to the Maltese economy. The centrist government of Malta at the time had no real ideological commitment to co-operation. However, in line with European Union policy, it could have seen in co-operation a way of further strengthening the economy, especially in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. However, towards the end of 2012 the government lost its majority in Parliament, parliamentary work came to a standstill, and the new co-operative legal framework never materialised.

The European Council 17 June 2010 Conclusions established a new ten-year plan to follow up on the Lisbon Strategy. The new strategy, called the EU 2020 strategy, is based on five headline targets (European Council Conclusions 2010/13/EUCO, p.2) that establish that by 2020 the EU would:

- Reach an employment rate of 75% for people aged 20 to 64;
- Raise public and private investment in research and innovation to 3% of GDP;
- Reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 20% when compared to 1990 levels and at the same time increase "the share of renewables in final energy consumption to 20%; and moving towards a 20% increase in energy efficiency";
- Reduce the rate of early school leavers to less than 10% and increase the percentage of those having attained a tertiary level of education in the age cohort 30 to 34 years to at least 40%;
- Promote social inclusion, in particular through the reduction of poverty, by aiming to lift at least 20 million people out of the risk of poverty and exclusion (European Council Conclusions 2010/13/EUCO, p.11-12).

In the same Council Conclusions it was argued that

> The strategy will help Europe recover from the crisis and come out stronger, both internally and at the international level, by boosting competitiveness, productivity, growth potential, social cohesion and economic convergence (European Council Conclusions 2010/13/EUCO, p.2).

It is very clear that the main preoccupation was to strengthen the capacity of the Union to create jobs and to rope as many people as possible into employment in order to

increase the GDP at member state and at Union level. The way the rationale is laid out makes one think that the consideration for social cohesion is not based on any claims for social justice but rather stems out of a need to get as many people into employment as possible in order to generate more wealth and more financial stability as a deterrent against a repeat of the 2008 financial crackdown. The ultimate aim is to ensure that as a productive unit the EU stands squarely on its feet and does not remain susceptible to the whims of the US economy. The way up to these aspirations is couched in a language that is almost exclusively pinned upon human capital theory. The *Education and Training Monitor 2014* makes the argument quite clear, stating that as the EU moves slowly out of its worst crisis since its inception, "there is a compelling case to be made for improving education to generate smart, sustainable and inclusive growth" (European Union, 2014, p.12). It is understandable that one would make the case for employment, seeing that people need to earn a living to live a decent life. But in contemporary EU policy, learning is almost exclusively interpreted as preparation for employability and for contributing to the economy. The same document makes it clear in no uncertain terms that

> Current wages and lifetime earnings increase with higher qualifications and competences. This, in turn, echoes into macroeconomic development and societal prosperity, as the quality of human capital translates into stronger employment, productivity, innovation and competitiveness (European Union, 2014, p.12).

Human fulfilment is reduced to being able to get 'qualifications and competences'. It's not about growing (to use a Deweyan term), or about walking the perennially unfinished path towards fulfilment (to use Freire's paradigm), but mainly about contributing to the creation of wealth. This is done in competition with longstanding economies such as the US or upcoming contenders such as China, India or Brazil. Human fulfilment has been made to succumb to the generation of wealth rather than the other way round. That in 2014 the new president of the EU Commission Jean-Claude Juncker took away Adult Education from the remit of the Director General for Education and Culture and placed it under the Director General for Employment only goes to prove the point (European Commission, 2014, no pagination).

Co-operatives are not driven solely by the need to make a profit but rather to meet the needs of members in their quest to live a life that brings out the best in them as people. Juxtaposing co-operation with the human capital theory as espoused by the

EU is a very uneasy twinning exercise. One very simple question would bring the whole edifice down: who benefits most from the creation of wealth? The widening gap between rich and poor in many countries, including the richest countries in the EU (OECD, 2015, p.21) confirms that the creation of more wealth does not necessarily mean better communities. Rather, the rich are getting richer and poor are getting poorer. This is not a leftie rant. A 2015 OECD report states that

> While the flashy lifestyles and incomes of the top 1% are certainly eye-catching, focusing on them exclusively risks obscuring another area of growing concern in inequality – namely the declining situation of low-income households. This is not a small group. In recent decades, as much as 40% of the population at the lower end of the distribution has benefited little from economic growth in many countries. In some cases, low earners have also seen their income fall in real terms (OECD, 2015, p.21).

Co-operating for a new way of building the economy is nothing short of challenging the dominant discourse that human activity only has some worth if it contributes to the generation of wealth. Co-operation also has the potential of enabling people to produce and consume together not to generate profits but primarily to satisfy their needs as human beings, needs that go far beyond the need to have money in their pockets. Given that the 'trickling down of the economy' model is proving always more to be nothing short of a fallacy, people using co-operation to address their needs in collective ways through grassroots initiatives has the potential of being an emergent oppositional model that will work out to bring more social justice.

In the electoral manifesto that brought the Maltese Labour Party to power in 2013 (Partit Laburista, 2013, p.27, 35), co-operation had its fair share of mention. It was seen as a specialised economic sector worth having its own specialised bank. It was also seen as a grassroots movement that could give voice to farmers and fishermen in consultative structures. It is a document that values co-operation as a participative mechanism of some worth, not only in economic but also in political terms. However, up till now, the consultation period in 2012-2013 that should have resulted in a new co-operative law in Malta has not borne any fruits yet. But there are other concerns that are hampering co-operation in Malta at present, besides the EU obsession with economic growth that is putting more money in the pockets of fewer people and an inadequate legal framework.

4.11   The Maltese co-operative movement today: a house divided

It has been apparent since the pioneering days of Rochdale that any real commitment to the ideology of co-operation can only come from those who see in co-operation a solution to their own needs. The government of Malta would only want to fulfil its electoral promises related to co-operation in as much as it would want to be credible with the electorate. But real, passionate change will only be possible if there is the will for it at grassroots level.

The last decade of the twentieth century and the first decade of the new century are a watershed in Maltese co-operative history. A new co-operative law was passed in 2001 which lowered the number of members needed to set up a co-operative from seven to five (*Co-operative Societies Act*, p.11), aiming to stimulate the setting up of new workers co-operatives and turn the co-operative model into a mainstay within the prevailing local economic scenario. The relationship between the Co-operatives Board, CCF and KM worked in a way that enabled the movement to move out of the stalemate situation which had seen the movement being prevalently associated with agriculture and fisheries. The movement started off with nine producers' co-operatives in 1947. Forty years later the number had only risen to fifteen. It does not seem that government, both colonial and national, had managed to convince the Maltese population that co-operation actually worked or that it had any benefits. However, probably because of educational campaigns carried out by *Koperattivi Malta* (KM), and partly because of the short-lived Labour government's initiatives between 1996 and 1998 to foster co-operation in the civil service, in 1997 the number of co-operatives rose to twenty-nine, and went up again to forty-eight in 2007. In 2014 the number of registered co-operatives spiralled to seventy-three (Koperattivi Malta, no date, no pagination). These co-operatives were made up of about 5,200 members and generated an average annual turnover of €76 million (Malta Cooperatives Federation, no date, no pagination).

However, the co-operative movement today has an identity crisis. The new workers' co-operatives felt that the set-up of KM was too biased towards the agriculture, fisheries and transport co-ops, with a representative council elected on the basis of a number of seats being secured for these sectors. In 2008 some of them mounted a campaign to oust the best leaders of the agricultural movement from their seats as elected members of the board of CCF. Problems spilled over into KM and in April 2012 culminated in the resignation of the two members of the council that

actually came from small workers' co-operatives. The two representatives sent an email to all co-operatives spelling out the reasons for their resignation, listing among other things the 'undemocratic' way in which decisions were being taken in the council. Someone forwarded the email to a local daily, *L-Orizzont* (Craus, 2012, no pagination), and the situation escalated. Ultimately, in November 2012 a Malta Cooperatives Federation was set up by a small number of workers' co-operatives. The movement today is a house divided.

A second negative development was the lack of sound judgement by those who drafted the 2001 law which permitted people elected to the council of KM to also stand to be elected to the CCF board. In 2008 there were people elected to both committees and this raised questions about conflicts of interest. Baldacchino and Bugeja (2012) summarise the situation by arguing that

> With respect to the Central Co-operative Fund (CCF), the appointment of its Board, with potential concurrent membership of both the KM and the CCF, can evidently cause uneasiness within the institutional bodies, as well as with co-operatives vis-à-vis the institutions. The principal consideration is the perceived COI [conflict of interest] arising from the fact that the majority of individuals on the CCF Board are also allowed to form part of the KM Council. As a result, the same individuals may wear different hats for different occasions, such as with their dual role in the presentation and approval of projects. (Baldacchino and Bugeja, 2012, p.9-10).

What Baldacchino and Bugeja (2012) were concerned about was mainly the fact that members of the council of KM would propose projects for funding to CCF. Then, the same people would sit on the board of CCF and would approve the funding of the same projects they had proposed as representatives of KM. The eventual conflict of interest as well as the fact that the movement had split and driven itself into disarray, led the government to secure control of the Board of the CCF. It did not alter the constitution of the Board, which had a majority of elected members from among the delegates of the co-operatives, but it imposed upon it a Provisional Board through Subsidiary Legislation 446.06 in September 2012. The Provisional Board, made up of three persons appointed directly by the Minister, had the power "to approve, refuse, amend or change requests and proposals made to it by the Committee;" and "to authorise any spending and other expenses from the Fund, as may be recommended to it by the Committee or as it may establish" (Subsidiary Legislation 442.06, 2012, p.1). So while the Board of CCF remained intact, in reality it was shorn of all its autonomy and power.

The co-operative movement in Malta today is at the crossroads. The government controls the Co-operatives Board which is the regulatory body, and also controls the CCF, which manages the savings of the co-operatives over the years, through the Provisional Board. Through its control over CCF government is holding back funding for *Koperattivi Malta* and is thus also directly influencing the power of the major representative of Maltese co-operatives. The schism between *Koperattivi Malta* and the Malta Cooperatives Federation has deprived the movement of all credibility and of much of its agency. This occurred mainly because the democratic structures of the movement were not flexible enough to foster trust between the traditional agricultural producers' co-operative sector and the new workers' co-operatives.

The movement was initiated on the island through top-down legislation enacted by the colonial government. Maltese co-operators have had to take their time to learn how to appropriate the notion of co-operation and to make co-operation work in the way they thought best. But the hold of government has not desisted and at the present moment it is at its highest level. Concurrently, the co-operative grassroots are pretty well divided, sitting across a well-guarded curtain wall. Notwithstanding the unprecedented power the government is wielding today, it is only action from below that can save the movement. The commitment of co-operators to co-operation as an ideology is currently being tested to the limit. The present crisis could prove to be the providential moment when local co-operators and leaders of the co-operative movement can re-invent co-operation in Malta as a way of being, of being with others, and of being with others to address collective issues through collective solutions in an island-state context. Only a soul searching exercise at grassroots level can restore credibility and agency to the co-operative movement and the ideals it stands for.

4.12 Conclusion

The millennial colonial legacy has led the Maltese to learn the disempowering attitude of assistencialism (Freire, 1998, p.16) and the missed opportunity to learn from responsibility (Sen, 2001, p.284). The co-operative model itself was handed down to the Maltese by an ordinance presented to the legislative assembly by the British Lieutenant Governor. The agricultural co-operatives found it hard to do without the substantial hand-holding initiated by Oscar Paris and his pioneering team. Learning how to run a financially viable co-op was something not many of the agricultural

primary co-operatives managed to do. There is very little evidence that agricultural practices have been drastically changed through this 'assistencialistic' form of co-operation. As a matter of fact, while the wholesaling of fruits and vegetables was effected in some way with the setting up of the agricultural producers' co-operatives, farming remained pretty much a lonely and individualistic job, with no real co-operation at production level. The nationalistic government of the 1970s portrayed Mintoff as the father, saviour and architect of the nation, someone who replaced the great colonial providers of the past. Rather than looking for assistance and guidance from the colonial authorities, the local population, including the co-operatives, looked up to the Maltese politicians with the same subservient disempowered attitude. Government recourse to the workers' co-op model to save jobs in the manufacturing industry failed miserably. Workers trained to obey orders in foreign-owned textile factories could not learn to become independent minded, entrepreneurial and self-confident workers at the whims of government. Yet again, a top-down approach that lacked a true commitment to the ideals of co-operation as an alternative economic model could not bear any fruit. A more bottom-up, workers' co-operative movement aided by voluntary schemes for civil servants to set up their own co-operatives through a gradual weaning-off process enabled participants to learn how to set up their own co-operative businesses. The government created 'invited spaces' (Gaventa, 2005, p.11) for its own employees to set up workers co-ops that would gradually become independent of government. Other workers from outside the public service 'claimed spaces' (Gaventa, 2005, p.11) in order to set up workers' co-ops, seeing in them practical alternative collective ways to address their needs. This learning process enabled workers' co-ops to take off. This had to be followed by a parallel process of divesting oneself of a neo-colonialist mentality. It implied the ability to learn how to act freely by resorting to the setting up of worker-owned co-operative enterprises against the background of a young nation state in search of its identity within the European Union. But this could not happen without the difficulties usually associated with the birth of something new and the death of something past its age. The traditional co-operatives have found themselves at loggerheads with some of the new workers' co-operatives and government used its regulatory position through the Co-operatives' Board and the newly set up Provisional Board to control all the deliberations and transactions carried out by the formerly autonomous Central Co-operatives Fund (CCF). Given that *Koperattivi Malta* (KM), the association of Maltese co-operatives, operated on funds provided by CCF, the government is presently also indirectly

controlling KM through the Provisional Board. I argued that at this moment when government is wielding maximum control over the movement, co-operators and co-operatives could be in a situation where they can put their act together to re-appraise the ideology of co-operation they truly subscribe to, in order to re-invent an autochthonous model that truly provides local communities with an alternative model to the dominant forms of economic organisation within the context of an island state that is currently experiencing unprecedented economic expansion.

Given that no hegemony is total, and that no social reality is monolithic, even within the traditional agricultural co-operative sector, there are counter-examples of re-appropriation of the ideology of co-operation as an alternative model for development and growth at individual and collective level. In the next chapter I will discuss the methods I used to carry out two case studies with two rural co-operatives. One of them was set up by Oscar Paris. The other was set up in the first decade of this century in very different circumstances. The first passed through a metamorphosis from producers' co-operative to a mainly specialised consumer co-operative and advocacy community. The second developed out of a grassroots initiative to stand up to government plans for tourism and transport projects that were going to have devastating effects on a small rural community. The co-operative model was sought out of a belief that it could provide the structure to the agency of the people involved, set as they were to not only oppose government proposals, but also to propose their own alternative projects for their own locality. What stands out in both case studies is the local communities' vision of a better and more equitable world in collision course with the authorities' vision of what is best for the country or for the European Union. What also stands out is the belief of both communities that the co-operative model was a credible structure that would enable them to reach their aims of transforming visions into reality.

Chapter 5

The research method: research for and within transformative action

5.1   Introduction

Speaking about the role of what he refers to as the 'transformative intellectual' Giroux (1997) outlines the necessary links between working for social justice and the role of research. He writes that

> transformative intellectuals need to understand how subjectivities are produced and regulated through historically produced social forms and how these forms carry and embody particular interests (Giroux and Simon, 1984). At the core of this position is the need to develop modes of inquiry that not only investigate how experience is shaped, lived and endured within particular social forms such as schools, but also how certain apparatuses of power produce forms of knowledge that legitimate a particular kind of truth and way of life (Giroux, 1997, p.196).

The role of the intellectual-researcher is to uncover forms of covert oppressive power as well as to reveal stories of resistance and creative anti-hegemonic grassroots initiatives, helping to

> develop a mode of educational inquiry that integrates the language of critique with a language of possibility, and in doing so provide the theoretical basis for a radical pedagogy as a form of cultural politics (Giroux, 1997, p.197).

In this chapter I will discuss my own position of researcher within the context of grassroots community co-operatives and the pertinent challenges they face. I will first revisit the research questions which I have outlined in Chapter 1, as well as provide some very brief information about the two case studies which I have carried out. I will then discuss how qualitative research can contribute to praxis, an inquiry that does not serve its own aims but rather contribute to the struggle for social justice. In my case it was an occasion for me as researcher and activist and for the participants

in the research to focus and reflect on our work, past achievements and dreams about the future, trying to make sense of what we do, how and why we do it. I then move on to discuss the nature of case study research mainly by relying on Punch who outlines four salient characteristics of case study research, namely that case studies have a clear boundary, they have a clearly identified subject, they make an explicit attempt to keep the wholeness of the case, and that qualitative methods are used to study the case (Punch, 1998, p.153). Next I discuss the research design and the way I went about carrying out the data collection process with the two neighbouring co-operatives that were to be the subject of the research project, Mġarr Farmers' Co-operative Society (MFCS) Ltd. and *Koperattiva Rurali Manikata* (KRM) Ltd.

In the second half of the chapter I discuss four issues that are critical to the research project. The first one is the relationship between me as researcher and the interviewees as active participants in the research process, where the building of trust between the two is seen as a way of leading both researcher and researched to move out of their comfort zone and expose their ideas, actions and value systems during the encounters that made up the data gathering process. The second issue was my ambivalent position of researcher and activist. I was not a detached researcher exploring an alien culture, but someone who was deeply immersed in the situations being studied. I make reference particularly to Madison's notion of 'positionality' (Madison, 2004, p.7) as well as to Thompson's own experiences of being herself an academic researcher and a frontline activist (Thompson, 2000, p.176) to make sense of my own researcher-activist potentially ambiguous position. A third issue I discuss is the value of the research in terms of generalizability. I argue that my research is inherently an activist research. Its aim was mainly for me and my co-activists to reflect on our own engagement with social and political reality and on what we learned from the process. I was particularly interested in inquiring into the possibility of generalizing the ability of people to take more control over their lives. Finally I discuss how I tackled the problem of reactivity that could result both in those cases where the participants and I started off as strangers to each other and also in those situations where the interviewees were practically my colleagues on the management committee of the co-op we have set up together. I argue that reflexivity was the right antidote all along the process.

5.2   The research questions

In the 21st issue of *The Co-operator* William King argued that participating in a co-operative was an intrinsic educational experience for the people who bear the collective responsibility for running a community-owned business enterprise (Mercer, 1922, p.83). From a critical point of view, in my research I wanted to enquire about what motivates people to take part in a co-operative, what urges them to become active within it and to be in the place where decisions are taken. I wanted to know what people learned from their participation, and whether they saw their activism as a learning experience in itself. I translated these curiosities into three basic questions. The first question is: What do people *learn in* the co-operative? By this I meant exploring the learning that goes on while co-op members or employees participate in the management and administration of the co-op. The second question is: What do people *learn from* the co-op? By this I intended exploring what people outside the coop (customers, inactive members, members of the local community, policy makers) learn from what goes on inside the co-op. The third question is: What do people *learn for* the co-op? By this I meant to explore ways in which participants learned how to use the co-operative organisational structure as a political tool that would enable them to create a more equitable world. I wanted to inquire into how people learned to use the co-operative structure in order to exert more control over their lives in participative spaces of their own creation.

Concurrently the interviews I conducted were meant to be a reflective exercise, enabling both myself as interviewer and co-operative activist, and the interviewees, to reflect on our activism in the co-operative movement as a learning experience at the personal and the collective level. At the general level the research was meant to be a reflective exercise that would explore whether us co-operators saw co-operatives as organizational structures that fostered learning and growth among farmers as a 'community of practice' and among local communities as groups of people claiming, creating and sharing places and spaces for action. I was particularly interested in exploring such themes as the correlation between a participant's level of formal education and his or her level of participation in the co-op. Another theme was that of leadership within a co-operative community. Thirdly I wanted to delve into the structural vertical and horizontal relationships in which the two co-ops taken as case studies were involved, exploring particularly the wider political context at the national and European level. Fourthly I was curious to know whether co-operation was seen by

participants as a solution to the daunting challenges which the agricultural sector was facing after Malta's accession to EU membership. Lastly, I was interested in exploring the dissonance between, on the one hand, the European Union's emphasis on competitiveness and employability and, on the other hand, the co-operative values of collectively engaging with what Freire would call the 'epochal themes' affecting communities. One such particular theme ironically was the negative effect of globalisation and of EU federative processes on local agriculture and local ways of life.

In order to investigate these questions I identified two neighbouring co-operatives as case studies: Mġarr Farmers' Co-operative Society and *Koperattiva Rurali Manikata*. Both operate in areas related to agriculture though with a different membership base and reaching out to a different clientele. They have been chosen for this study for a number of reasons. Formally set up in 1947 in response to a colonial government initiative Mġarr Farmers' Co-operative Society is one of the most organised and active among the 'traditional' farmers' co-operatives. It acts as a farmers' lobby, runs an agricultural supplies shop and is a member of the secondary co-operative Farmers' Central Co-operative Society (FCCS) which manages a shed at the central vegetable market. They are active members of *Koperattivi Malta*. Individual members of the co-operative are also very active in their village of Mġarr, personally involving themselves with the local council and the local parish in the organisation of community activities. On the other hand, *Koperattiva Rurali Manikata* is not a member of FCCS and was set up much later, in 2007, on the initiative of some farmers who were reacting against government's plans for a golf course and a motorway in their locality. It ventures into such areas as rural tourism, children's education in rural themes and the direct marketing of agricultural products. Put together, the two co-operatives provide a varied and interesting spectrum of people who look at such issues as agriculture, co-operation, member participation, gender equality, engagement with political power, and the learning that goes on within and around co-operatives from different angles.

5.3   Research, the creation of knowledge and the quest for social justice

Freire argues that knowledge is not an objective amount of facts that some deposit into the memory of others. Rather, knowledge is constructed in the everyday struggle for humanization. It is a struggle that combines action and reflection, a cycle of inquiry into the empirical knowledge of the oppressed, critical reflection and action. As Freire

(1990) argues, it is this very process of being able to partake in the 'inquiry' and 'praxis' that make people human. In his words,

> Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry men pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other (Freire, 1990, p.46).

Inquiry or research is, at the bottom line, a search for meaning. This stance is at the heart of ethnographic research. Writing about this kind of research Harvey (1990) argues that the researcher's role is to "become acquainted with meanings" which the subjects participating in the research attribute to their own actions. It is a way of getting at "an understanding of the group from their point of view" (Harvey, 1990, p.8).

He argues that these meanings can be brought to the fore either by "co-existing with the group" or else through semi-structured interviews that allow the interviewees the liberty to speak about their own way of interpreting their world and their actions within that world (Harvey, 1990, p.8).

Harvey then identifies 'critical ethnography' as not only accessing the repertoire of meanings which research subjects have developed, but also tries to get at the wider power frameworks within which the research participants develop their meanings. In Harvey's words,

> Critical ethnography requires the location of interesting social microcosms in wider structural forms. It also requires that the understanding of these structural forms is mediated by the closely observed detail of social practices and the meanings they encompass (Harvey, 1990, p.10).

Thus in Harvey's point of view, the researcher and the respondents participate in the construction of knowledge not only by bringing to the surface the interviewees' interpretation of what happens in their daily lives, but also by putting that daily struggle in the wider network of power relations that bear upon their world.

At the heart of this kind of social research there is a living subject, what Madison (2004) refers to as 'the Other', a human being with a "voice, body, history, and yearnings" (Madison, 2004, p.10) that are revealed in the dialogical encounter between the researcher and the researched. The research becomes a dialogical encounter where knowledge is co-produced by researcher and researched as meanings of the everyday life are investigated within the realm of a bigger canvas with multi-layered

perspectives that include the local community, the occupational community, the co-operative, the interest groups, the nation state as well as supranational structures.

This search for meaning and co-production of knowledge departs from and gives primacy to the participants' endeavours to make sense of what is happening in their daily lives, stretched as they are between the personal and the global. As such it is diametrically opposite to positivist views of knowledge and knowledge-creating processes. Rather, it is rooted in the value systems of the participants. According to Griffiths (1998), "'values' include any evaluation, ethical or not, that something is good, bad or neither – or, indeed, beautiful, funny, disgusting, surprising or interesting" (Griffiths, 1998, p.46). Values become a point of reference, a key of interpretation of the meanings unearthed in the dialogical encounter between researcher and researched. In this encounter the participants do not sit on the fence but take sides. They are politically positioned according to their ethical choices. As Griffiths argues, "knowledge gets its meaning from the political position of the knowers, as well as from other value systems" (Griffiths, 1998, p.46). Within the paradigm borrowed from critical ethnography, the researcher does not enjoy a positivistic bird's eye view, a view from nowhere, but rather gets entangled in the researched situation and exposes his or her political position as he or she entices the participants to rummage about their own world and the power structures in which it orbits, making sense of it through their own categories of what is good or bad, right or wrong, useful or irrelevant, beautiful or damning.

Putting the question of power relations under scrutiny, and examining it in relation to the participants' value systems and political positioning, is not only a process of "construction of knowledge" (Griffiths, 1998, p.51) but is also a *sine qua non* in the struggle for social justice (Griffiths, 1998, p.54). According to Griffiths, the very possibility of taking part in social, politically situated inquiry enables participants to develop "political consciousness", that is, the possibility not only of creating knowledge but of creating oneself through action by participating in a group or groups with whom the individual shares values, beliefs, aims, or causes worth fighting for. Within the paradigm of power relations, these same groups enjoy "unequal power" and thus, in the quest for social justice, researcher and researched need to inquire about "whose interests are being served, and what power structures underlie this" (Griffiths, 1998, p. 57). Thus, research would serve to enlighten transformative action upon the world in the quest for social justice. This brings us back to Freire (1998) who contends that

> Knowledge is not *extended* from those who consider that they know to those who consider that they do not know. Knowledge is built up in the relations between human beings and the world, relations of transformation, and perfects itself in the critical problematization of these relations. [...] The effort required is not one of *extension* but of *conscientização*. If it is carried out, it allows individuals to assume critically the position they have in relation to the rest of the world. The critical taking up of this position brings them to assume the true role incumbent on them as people. This is the role of being Subjects in the transformation of the world, which humanizes them (Freire, 1998, p.110-111).

Indeed this research has been a process for me and for the other participants to look critically at our involvement in the Maltese co-operative movement, specifically in the rural and agricultural sectors. Along the way participants were enticed to make sense of what, how and why they involve themselves in co-operatives, and how they transform their world while securing their own growth in the process. It was a process in which researcher and researched could put their value systems, what they believe in and what they have done in following those beliefs, under the lens. The interviews were moments in which participants in the research could look upon what they had learned as they engaged with forms of power beyond the community in which they lived and orbited. The dialogical encounters in the research process led researcher and researched to see how working together in the co-operative structure had enabled participants to influence the way events that impinge upon the community's lives develop.

5.4   Case study research

Punch (1998, p.153) outlines four key characteristics of case study research. First he clarifies that a case study is a "bounded system", where "the boundaries between the case and the context" need to be clearly identified and described. Secondly, it is important to state "what the case is a case of" in order to determine the "unit of analysis". Thirdly a case study explicitly attempts "to preserve the wholeness, unity and integrity of the case" balancing this with a need to develop a specific focus on certain aspects of the case being studied. Lastly, a case study generally implies the use of different sources of data, usually qualitative in nature.

The co-operatives chosen for this research project are two very distinct, clearly identifiable institutions with a formal organisational set-up and a paid membership base. Both are registered with the Co-operatives Board and consequently are a legal

body recognized at law. However, Punch (1998) argues that in case-study research "the boundaries between the case and the context are not necessarily clearly evident" (Punch, 1998, p.153). For example, in one of the co-operatives under study one of the interviewees was not a member of the co-operative; however, it was acceptable practice in the co-operative in question that the wife can represent her husband in co-operative meetings that are usually reserved to the paid membership on the basis of her husband's shareholding; at the same time she continually spoke in terms of 'us' (her family) and 'them' (the co-operative leadership) as if the co-operative membership base and the co-operative management committee were two separate entities.

Secondly, both Mġarr Farmers' Co-operative Society and *Koperattiva Rurali Manikata* are two small rural co-operatives, directly linked to agriculture, a small membership base, an elected management committee, and a place and space where people get involved voluntarily as farmers or as members of a local rural community. Members interact with each other but also engage with the social, economic and political context around them, sometimes from a position of strength, sometimes from a position of weakness. In both co-operatives some members are more vocal than others; some voices speak in a tone of approval, others in a tone of contestation; some feel they are exercising power while others feel they are succumbing to it or need to resist it or contest it. Above all both co-operatives are places and spaces where people learn knowledge, skills and attitudes in relation to themselves, the co-op and the wider complex world of hegemonic and counter hegemonic discourses and structures.

Thirdly Punch (1998) speaks about keeping a balance between the need to preserve the wholeness of the case study and the need to focus (Punch, 1998, p.153). Qualitative data collection methods have been used in the research project. An effort was made to keep a balance between focusing on (a) the 'structures of feeling' among the interviewees, trying to get at the dynamic tensions within the co-operatives being studied, (b) the wider context in which the two small co-operatives orbited, (c) the relationship between the interviewees and the immediate context of the co-operatives, and (d) the relationship between the co-operatives and the wider national and European context. Discussions were made about the tension between structure and agency, wherein structure is located either within the co-operative itself, mainly the elected committee, or outside of it in clearly identifiable locations such as the Local Council, the Ministry of Resources and Rural Affairs or the European Commission. The research process tried to capture the 'structures of feeling' that on Raymond Williams's

(1977) account would mean the way that the interviewed activists were living, feeling, interpreting and making sense of the tension between their own ways of life and the rapidly changing social, economic and political world around them. Being still at the phase of 'structures of feeling' meant that this lived tension had a structure of its own that was, however, still in the making and shaping and thus needed more probing, discussion and dialogue in order to bring it to the fore and give it more visibility (Williams, 1977, p.132).

Finally, the case study has been carried out by using qualitative data collection methods, primarily semi-structured interviews and group discussions. A first meeting was held with the management committee of each co-operative where I explained the aim of the research and methods I was going to use. This was followed by ten one-to-one semi-structured interviews with members from each co-op. Once these interviews were over and some preliminary data analysis was conducted, I held a second meeting with each management committee where I discussed salient issues emanating from interviews and got feedback from the committees about them.

5.5   Designing and implementing the research project

My involvement with farmers' co-operatives led me to believe that they must be a veritable learning experience for many who involve themselves in them, particularly by serving on committees or volunteering in activities. Departing from my readings related to democracy and critical pedagogy, I set off with a set of tentative issues I wanted to explore in relation to the learning that goes on inside and around co-operative activism. Then I identified two co-operatives with whom I wanted to explore the issues. I thought that the best way to go about exploring such an intensely human, personal and inter-personal theme as learning was a qualitative study based on semi-structured one-to-one interviews and group discussions. These would deal with themes and issues, drawing up narratives that as Cortazzi (1993) argues, lead the researcher and researched to investigate "culture, experience and beliefs" (Cortazzi, 1993, p.5). I went for two case studies that would put personal and collective narratives in context, given that as Cohen et al. (2000) argue,

> human systems have a wholeness or integrity to them rather than being a loose connection of traits [...]. Further, contexts are unique and dynamic, hence case studies investigate and report the complex dynamic and unfolding interactions

of events, human relationships and other factors in a unique instant (Cohen et al., 2000, p. 181).

First, I chose the Mġarr Farmers' Co-operative Society, a very active farmers' co-operative set up in 1947. Secondly I chose *Koperattiva Rurali Manikata* of which I am a founder member and in which I am very active, mostly on a voluntary basis. It was set up in 2007 by a community action group made up of farmers and residents of Manikata.

Writing about educational research in a school setting Goodson and Walker (1997) argue that

> to a great degree the right to introduce and define issues should lie with those being researched... Further, we contend that the people who are researched are more important than any detached analysis of their actions... The result of these beliefs would be a more collaborative, personalized (some might even say fraternized) vision of research. The focus moves away from the psychometric pursuit of numbers and categories, away too from compartmentalized interaction studies, and toward a deeper engagement with the teacher's (or the child's) biography and lifestyle. Without movement into these areas (and the intrusive nature of the methods must be faced squarely), research will remain firmly locked into tacit 'no trespassing' arrangements which will preserve the phenomenon of the 'two worlds' (Goodson and Walker, 1997, p.112-113).

The same is, however, true of the rural co-operatives I was engaging with. I was convinced from the outset that a fruitful research process had to foster the forging of positive inter-personal relationships built on trust and a degree of negotiation about aims, parameters but also issues and themes to be raised, discussed, questioned and debated. My first contact was the president of the Mġarr Farmers' Co-operative Society. His first reaction was quite on the defensive, "We do not divulge any information regarding our business." However, as I made my intentions clearer while we spoke, he was more open to the idea. Some days later he called, inviting me to drive up to Mġarr and meet the committee in order to explain the aims, parameters and methods involved in the research. During the meeting I discussed the purposive sampling I intended to use, aiming at as wide a variety of interviewees as possible. Ideally interviewees had to be chosen from regular members of the co-op, people sitting on the committee, people occupying a position on the committee, and employees. They also had to be of different gender, age and level of education.

An issue I raised with the committee was that of anonymity and the protection of participants in the research. At the time I was impressed by a short note right at the

end of Lorenzo Milani's book *Esperienze Pastorali* (a researched critique of the Italian Church's pastoral work in post-war Italy), which states that

> In this entire book the names of persons and of places have been altered only in certain more delicate cases. No other data has been altered. The episodes are rigorously historic, and, unless otherwise stated, always belong to people from San Donato (translated from Milani, 1997, p.474).

This option, characteristic of feminist action research, seeks to empower participants to stand up for what they believe in and for what they are. However, in the final instant I decided to discard this option for two reasons. Firstly, Malta is a very small island where many people know each other. The two co-operatives participating in the study are located in two very small neighbouring villages and so inter-personal relationships tend to take on larger-than-life dimensions. Secondly, I was afraid that enticing farmers to accept being quoted by their real names when speaking their mind about particularly sensitive issues related to interpersonal relationships, business or finances, would be too much to ask and that it would get in the way of striking a relationship of trust. So I opted for the safer route of anonymity for greater protection and harm prevention. This was done by changing names and other minor contextual elements.

Subsequently the committee secretary at Mġarr promised to identify ten people who would fit the criteria set out in the meeting and to send me their contact details after obtaining their consent to do so. Following this, I started meeting the ten interviewees, carrying out semi-structured interviews. I recorded and transcribed every interview and did preliminary analysis of the transcripts as they started piling up in order to elicit salient themes that I could explore in more depth in subsequent interviews. This helped me to obtain greater focus as the interviews progressed.

Bill Cooke (2004) highlights the importance of respecting interviewees and argues that

> The appropriation of information is extraction, as sure as the taking of natural resources or the attempts to patent the genes of commonly held plant stock. But its consequences are also uniquely malign, in that it exposes those from whom it has been extracted to the scrutiny, surveillance and intervention of powerful others (Cook, 2004, p.47-48).

This dissertation will be in the public domain. In order to avert some of the dangers highlighted by Cook, when the ten Mġarr interviews were ready, I did further analysis and produced a document which I passed to the president of the co-op. He took some

time to go over it and give me some feedback. Then we fixed a meeting with the whole committee in which I presented the highlights emerging from the document through a PowerPoint presentation. A discussion followed on a number of themes that came out of the interviews. This meeting enabled the committee, some of whom took part in the one-to-one interviews, to participate in the research process, contribute to it, have a last say on what went on in the individual discussions, and learn more from the process through a very lively discussion about the very raison d'être of the co-op they were managing. This last meeting brought to an end the formal research process and consolidated a friendship which matured as the research progressed.

When this process came to an end, I repeated the process with *Koperattiva Rurali Manikata*. However, here it was bound to differ on the grounds that I am an active member of the management committee and for the first seven years since the setting up of the co-op I held the key position of treasurer. I started by asking the secretary to include the research proposal on the agenda of a committee meeting. When the item came up for discussion I explained the aims of the research and discussed the ways in which we as a co-op and also as individuals could gain from the research project. I then explained the purposive sampling I was going to use and the safeguards I was going to take to protect interviewees. The committee agreed that the co-op should take part in the research and that I could proceed with the interviews. I then identified ten interviewees, trying to get the widest variety of participants in terms of age, gender, level of education and degree of involvement in the co-operative. I interviewed ten people using the same procedure used for the Mġarr interviews.

When the interviews were over, I created a PowerPoint presentation with the salient themes related to the critical issues emanating from the interviews and discussed it with the committee. The presentation included quotations from the transcripts and this gave the participants in the discussion the chance to engage with the proposed statements put forward in the presentation. A discussion followed about a number of issues that had surfaced in the previous interviews, including debates around the question of balancing rights and responsibilities within the co-op, the need for a fair distribution of work within the co-op, and also the issue of balancing the need to invest in salaries and the need to invest in marketing to increase sales and cash flow. The meeting was brought to a close with a lively discussion about how the co-operative could regain the fighting spirit of the 2005 action committee in order to keep guarding the community's rights. Among the issues raised in this discussion were the rights of

the local community to access a nature and history park over a large tract of land between the village and the cliffs overlooking the sea, as well as the way the co-operative could keep safeguarding the rights of farmers to their land in the face of other government-sponsored projects in the whereabouts of Manikata.

The process of data analysis started soon after the transcript of the very first interview. In this way, analysis fed into the research process, helping to obtain more focus as the data collection process gathered momentum. Simultaneously I continuously got back to the theoretical framework, focused as it is on critical pedagogy. This helped to raise certain issues with participants, as well as to ask critical questions about themes raised by the interviewees themselves. In this way, data gathering and data analysis were intertwined and informed each other. As a guiding framework I adopted the circular process which Punch (1998) identifies as the "Miles and Huberman Framework for Qualitative Data Analysis" (Punch, 1998, p.202). This entails a cycle of "data collection", "data reduction", "data display" and "verifying and drawing conclusions". "Data reduction" includes "summaries", "coding" and "memoing", identifying "themes, clusters and patterns". As the research project advances, "conceptualizing and explaining" will start to come to the fore. Data display entails finding ways to visualize the data in the most holistic and economic way, through different graphic models (Punch, 1998, p.204). It is a cyclical process where the three stages of data gathering, data analysis, and writing are interwoven.

Figure 5. Highlighting parts of the transcripts, taking notes, memoing and summarising
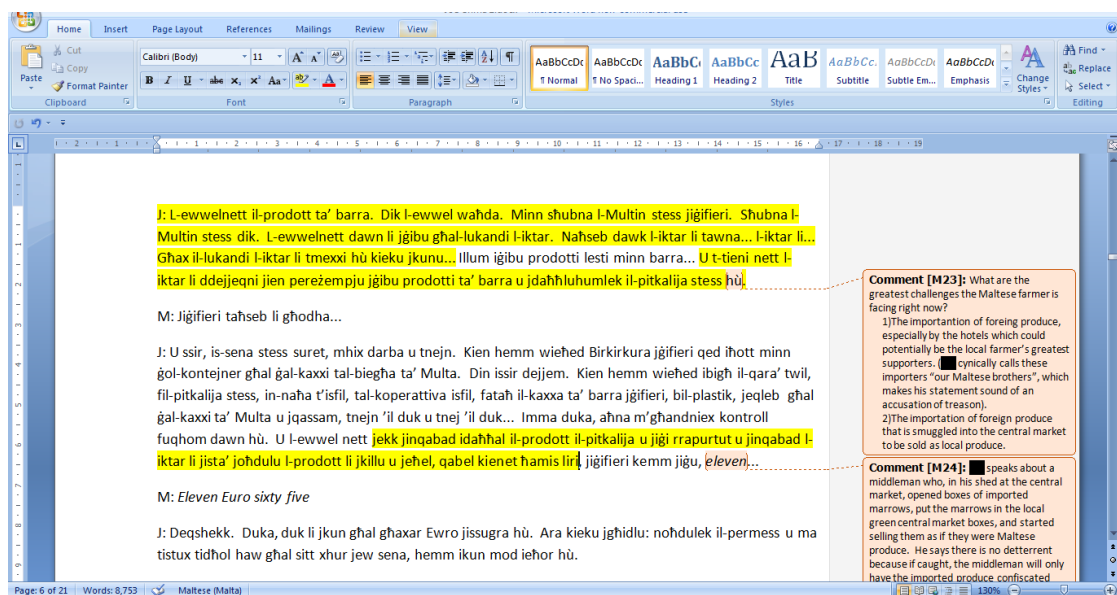
For my part, I transcribed each of the twenty interviews which were carried out in the Maltese language. As one interview followed another, I went over the transcripts, highlighting the most important, typical and representative, thought-provoking, original, unexpected and atypical excerpts in relation to such themes as

- power structures at micro family level, at local community level, at national and at EU level;
- power relationships within families, within the farming community, within local residential communities or between farmers' co-operatives and the national government or the EU Commission;
- gender roles within the family, within the co-operative or within the local residential community;
- democracy within co-operatives and within the Maltese co-operative movement.

I copied the highlighted excerpts and pasted them separately under different themes using 'One Note', a Microsoft Office software used to organise data under different, easily accessible, headings. This enabled me to reduce the data and to organise it in clusters. As this process went along I wrote memos against particular excerpts, trying to record all the ideas that came to mind while the data reduction, organisation and display went on. This process of moving away from the interviewees and finding the time to read the transcripts and coding the most important parts of them, and copying these parts and pasting them in different clusters under various headings permitted me to start also creating links between one cluster or theme and another. Sometimes this took the form of flowcharts, at other times it was more like spider webs. However, this process of reducing and graphically displaying data helped me to obtain more focus in the subsequent interviews by asking questions about certain emerging themes that were emanating from the data analysis exercise.

As the interviewing process came to an end, focus shifted on the themes themselves. I went over the clusters of data chunks pasted under each theme in order to get to a higher level of understanding about the relationships between different themes. The group interview at the end of each one of the two interview cycles enabled me to discuss the patterns that were emerging from the data. By that time these patterns were built upon a reduced number of what emerged as the main themes

mostly related to community empowerment, power relations within and outwith the
co-operative and the educational processes that are embedded in people's involvement

Figure 6. Organising chunks of data under labels or themes
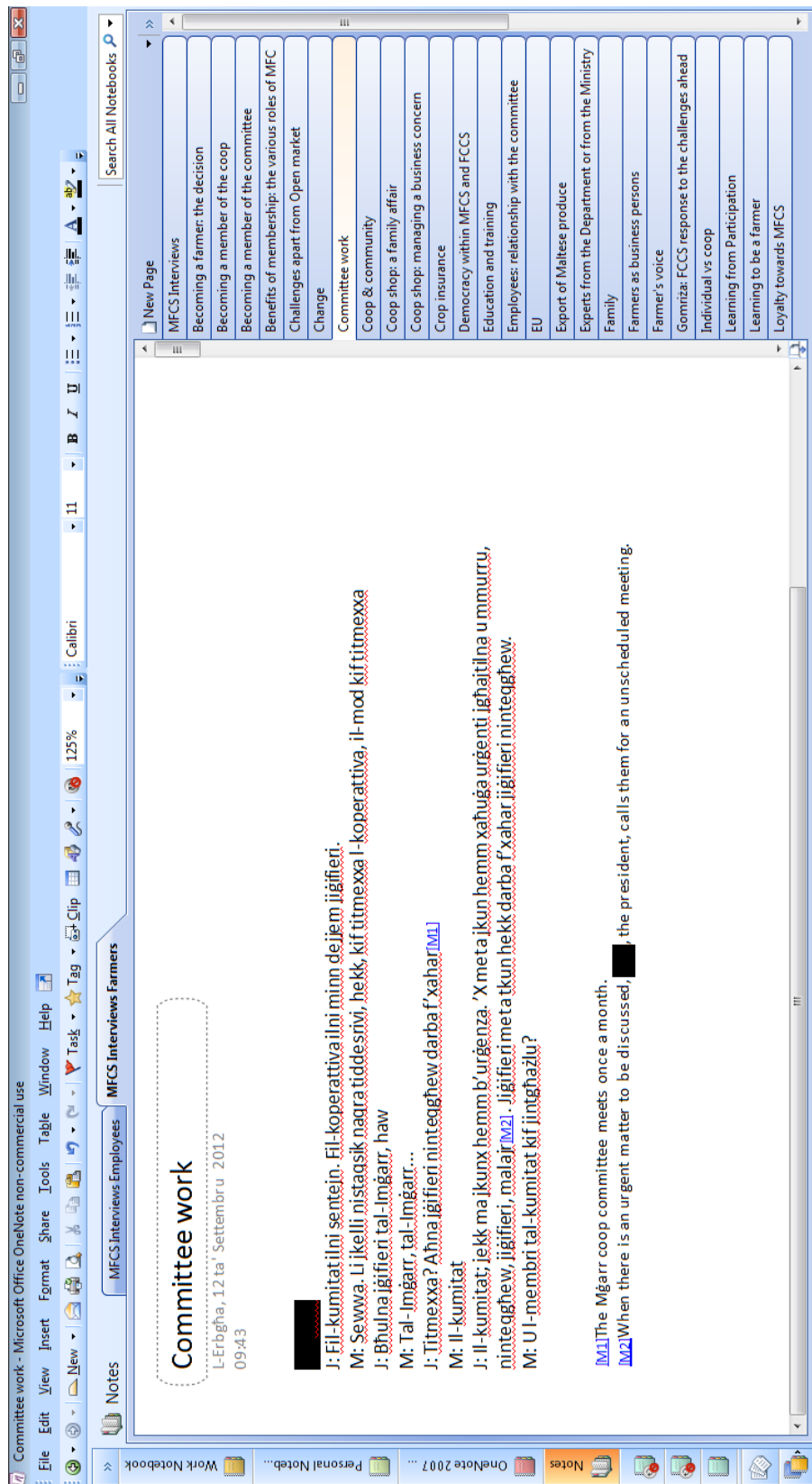
in power relations at co-operative level, residential community level, co-operative movement level, national level and EU level. The group interviews served to test my reflections about those themes. They also served to get the participants' reactions to my reflections.

Following this roadmap, I worked in a circular movement towards higher levels of focus, at the same time moving to and fro from critical themes that make up the theoretical framework. This brought the analytical process to completion and it was then the time to start organising the chapters of the dissertation.

Figure 7. Organising themes into clusters
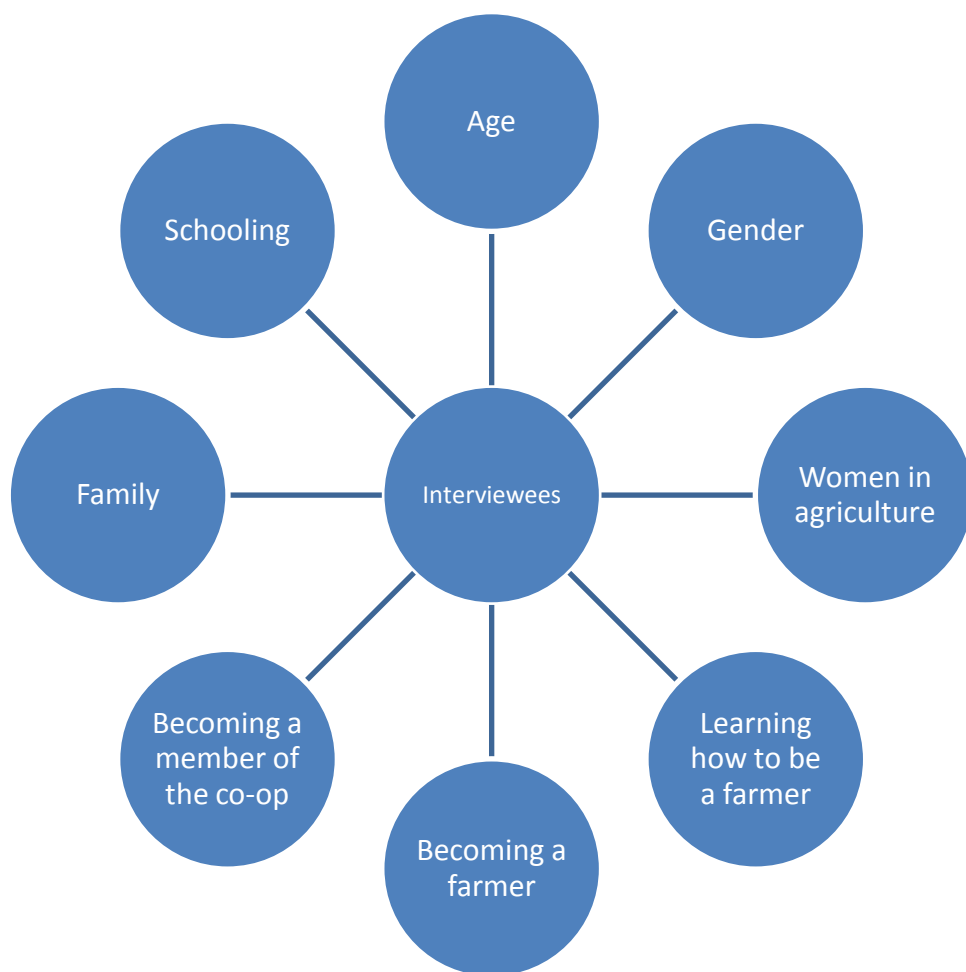
Figure 8. The first cycle of analysis led to the writing of chapters six and seven.   I went over the analysed data again, asking three very simple questions: What did people learn? How did they learn it? And why? I used grids similar to the one produced below to organise the answers for these questions, and to create links between the answers and the theoretical framework in order to move to a higher level of analysis. This second level of analysis led to the writing up of chapter 8.

MFCS: Learning for the co-op			
What?	How?	Why?	The wider picture: returning to the theoretical framework
Co-operation in the face of adversity: EU's neo-liberal competition ideology.	Farmers look up to the co-op as their voice with the authorities	Farmers have faith in the co-op as a legitimate and representative voice. On certain issues they see it is worthwhile to move beyond the rubble-walls around their farms and come together.	Co-operation can create representative voices for sectoral and local communities that, even if they are at the remotest places on earth, feel the negative effects of global capitalism and neo-liberal politics. Co-operation can enable sectoral or local communities to claim spaces at local, national and international level to engage with visible and hidden powers (Gaventa).
Using the co-op to create spaces where the success of the collective depends on the opening up of spaces for individual participation, empowerment and growth.	Creating trust-based spaces where farmers mostly knowledgeable about farming co-operate with employees who have a good grasp over managerial, financial and technical matters.	Farmers believe that the co-op is a democratic space where what counts is one's commitment and loyalty to the common good.	Co-operation has the ability to open spaces at local level where communities thrive on the interconnection between individual and collective growth. The more spaces are opened internally for individuals to interact and participate freely, thus stimulating their individual growth, the more the collective is able to engage with visible and hidden powers at local, national and global levels, stimulating its collective growth (Gaventa/Dewey).

5.6   Researcher and researched: forging a relationship based on trust

A first issue I would like to raise here is the relationship between the researcher and the researched. Reason (2011) says that positivist research is characterized by a marked dichotomy between the two and explains that contrary to positivism,

> participatory research, has placed a contrasting emphasis on collaboration between 'researcher' and 'subject', so that this distinction is done away with, and all those involved in the inquiry endeavour to act as co-researchers, contributing both to the decisions which inform the research and the action which is to be studied (Reason, 2011, p.99).

Similarly, the authors of the New Paradigm Research Manifesto (2011) pre-empt the tenets of positivism by arguing that

> Research can never be neutral. It is always supporting or questioning social forces, both in its content and by its method. It has effects and side-effects, and these benefit or harm people (New Paradigm Research Group, 2011, p.92).

Furthermore, social inquiry questions world views, and individual and collective frames of mind that determine behaviour. Thus, even the most objective of social research carried out in the most open of social systems, is bound to uncover crystallised patterns and relationships in the social sphere. The very fact of exposing them will lead to some kind of change. According to the Manifesto, "This is so whether change is intended or not" (New Paradigm Research Group, 2011, p.92).

Similarly to Reason (2011) above the New Research Paradigm Manifesto proposes a participatory kind of research characterized by

> a much closer relationship than that which is usual between the researcher and the researched: significant knowledge of persons is generated primarily through reciprocal encounter between subject and researcher, for whom research is a mutual activity involving co-ownership and shared power with respect both to the process and to the product of the research (New Paradigm Research Group, 2011, p.92).

Both research paradigms tend to favour an egalitarian relationship where the boundaries between researcher and researched are blurred and where "The shared language and praxis of subject and researcher created 'the world' to be studied" (New Paradigm Research Group, 2011, p.92). According to Reason a similar approach turns the inquiry process into a pedagogical experience where both researcher and researched learn by looking at their own practices from a critical stance, or as Harvey puts it, "the probing of the subjects' meanings" (Harvey, 1990, p.9). In Reason's words,

"the Participative inquiry is at its best a process that explicitly aims to educate those involved to develop their capacity for inquiry both individually and collectively" (Reason, 2011, p.100).

Looking back at my experience in the research I can note that as the interviews developed I sharpened my ability to speak less and to expose myself and my value system through the way I phrased my questions to participants. This provided the participants with the opportunity to discuss their ideas from their own perspective but also looking at them from other perspectives as well, engaging also with my own world views as they spoke, at times agreeing with me, at other times disagreeing in part or in total. With the Mġarr interviews, the fact that I was practically an outsider meant I had to ask some very simple and direct questions such as 'Who set up the co-op?', 'Why?' and 'Has the raison d'être changed over the years?' Although almost naive, similar questions enabled interviewees to stand back, look at what goes on inside their co-operative and realize that there is a wealth of knowledge that they could proudly share with outsiders. As the interviews progressed I sharpened my ability to enable interviewees to go over that knowledge critically, reflecting upon it as they spoke, sometimes asking back questions to me. In the Manikata interviews it was my turn to have to stand back from the reality I shared with my colleagues. I used the experience I gathered during the first round of interviews at Mġarr in order to reflect on the way I was conducting the interviews and ask questions that would enable me and my interlocutors to reflect critically about our own participation in the Manikata co-op. The co-op was a social reality we had created ourselves. Having been together since 2005, I had to consciously stand back from this same reality and help the interviewees to do the same. The interviews were meant to put our own world into question, to get into the nooks and crannies of that social reality and to engage with it with as few inhibitions as possible.

On the part of the interviewees there were overt signs of ownership of the process. While interviewing a full-time farmer from Mġarr, at one point I thought I had brought the interview to a close. But when I switched off the recorder the farmer said that we had missed two very important points that we should have spoken about. I switched on the recorder again, sat down and discussed the farmer's themes until he thought we had exhausted all arguments.

The interviewing experience also helped to change my perceptions about farmers, even close friends of mine. I had set out with the impression that farmers were mostly school failures who had gone into agriculture because they could not find any other employment given their low level of education. Some interviewees fitted into this model. But as I proceeded with the interviews I found myself speaking with full-time farmers who had finished compulsory education, one even went into higher education. These farmers looked back at their school days with nostalgia and argued that they did well at school. Some had left because their parents needed more helping hands on the farm or because they wanted to start earning money to create a future for themselves. Similarly, I thought I was going to interview people who would find it very difficult to articulate certain arguments. I was positively surprised with the way many considered themselves as front-liners in taking authorities to task about issues that concerned Maltese farmers in general. The research process opened for me a new window upon a small but vibrant community of farmers who were banking upon their own resources to wade their way through the very difficult times agriculture in Malta is passing through at the moment.

The committees of both co-operatives appreciated the group meetings we had at the end of the one-to-one interviews. The Mġarr committee got into a lively discussion about a couple of issues that were discussed in the individual interviews. Similarly the Manikata committee members commented that they were so taken up with their commitments in the co-operative that they needed more meetings for reflection about what they are doing, how they are doing it and where they want to take their co-operative.

5.7   Researcher and researched: my dual position as researcher and activist

A second issue I would like to discuss is the notion of activist research and its possibilities. Eleanor Jupp (2012) speaks about activism in terms of building up the 'capacities' of neighbourhoods to bring about the changes they deem necessary for them to lead the lives they feel entitled to. This seems to be very akin to Amartya Sen's capability approach to development (Sen, 2001). Jupp adopts a feminist approach to an activism that enables local communities to put personal issues at the centre of community politics. She speaks of the latter in terms of "the potential to produce

alternatives to dominant models of capitalism" and quotes authors Gibson and Graham to argue that everyday rituals can enable a neighbourhood to build up enough social capital that would enable that community to struggle for its entitlement in the face of economic and political inequities (Jupp, 2012, p.3013). This argument brings to the fore the conundrum of state responsibility. Jupp argues that building the capacity of neighbourhood communities through activism is never meant to supplant the obligations of the state towards its citizens. In her own words,

> In pointing to resources and capacities within neighbourhoods, this is not an argument for the state to withdraw their services and resources, but rather to begin by recognising that such capacities exist and that they may point the way to more just cities for everyone (Jupp, 2012, p.3041).

In other words, local activists are not there to do the work that should be done by state agencies but rather to indicate the best way that these agencies should be going about fulfilling their obligations towards communities.

For her part Anne H. Toomey (2011) focuses on activists as leaders within communities and argues that activists can play different roles that can build up capability or foster dependency. In typical Freirean discourse she argues that community leaders can build either 'vertical' or 'horizontal' relationships with their communities. She is decidedly for horizontal relationships arguing that these are the kind of relationships "in which the emphasis is on friendship and equal exchange, rather than the relationship being based an unequal flow of resources or knowledge from one to the other" (Toomey, 2011, p.191). Freire argued that authentic leaders need to "open up to the culture's soul […] to become wet, to become soaked in the cultural and historical waters of those individuals who are involved in the experience" (Freire, 1993, p.106). In very similar words Toomey argues that when a local leader plays the role of

> the rescuer, provider, modernizer or liberator [he/she] is inclined to dictate and to set the terms of participation; on the other hand, the catalyst, facilitator, ally or advocate is more likely to ask how to help, rather than making assumptions about what to do (Toomey, 2011, p.193).

Andrea Cornwall (2008) speaks about activism in terms of participation. She makes reference to the notion of space as developed by John Gaventa in his analytical tool of the 'power cube', particularly the notion of 'claimed or created space' (Gaventa, 2005, p.11). Cornwall argues that

> Spaces that people create for themselves, whether networks of neighbours or people who work together, women's groups or larger and more complex social movements, have an entirely different character from most invited spaces. For a start, they are often marked less by the considerable differences of status and power that can be found in the kinds of committees, councils and fora that have been created the world over for community involvement. Most commonly, they consist of people who come together because they have something in common, rather than because they represent different stakeholders or different points of view. These kinds of spaces can be essential for groups with little power or voice in society, as sites in which they can gain confidence and skills, develop their arguments and gain from the solidarity and support that being part of a group can offer (Cornwall, 2008, p.275).

Indeed, the activists that are the protagonists of this case study research are participants in participatory spaces that are wholly under their control. In the first case, it is a co-operative that was created on a model handed down by the British colonial authorities but which over time was appropriated by the participating farmers and turned into a collective instrument for advocacy and self-help. The other co-operative was created by community activists and used as a tool for bottom-up community development initiatives. The activists who participated in the two case-studies also participated in 'invited spaces' created by the authorities. On the other hand they sometimes created spaces in which they invited the authorities to take part, for example by asking people in authority to visit their co-op offices to discuss an agenda prepared by the co-op.

Secondly I would like to discuss my own position as activist and researcher. Madison (2004, p.6) writes about the 'positionality' of the researcher and of the subjects of the research. She argues that in a critical ethnographic research the "positionality of voices" is central. However, she also points out that 'positionality' does not concern only the subjects, but also the researcher himself or herself, more so when the researcher is herself an activist. Madison argues that the 'activism stance' is one in which

> the ethnographer takes a clear position in intervening on hegemonic practices and serves as an advocate in exposing the material effects of marginalized locations while offering alternatives (Madison, 2004, p.6).

The notion of positionality on the part of the researcher is also linked to reflexivity. The researcher and activist needs to be aware of his or her own guiding principles and values as well as of his or her position of power which in turn has its effect on the

subjects among whom the researcher is active and who in the situation of research are his or her research objects/subjects. Madison argues that

> When we turn back, we are accountable for our own research paradigms, our own positions of authority, and our own moral responsibility relative to representation and interpretation (Madison, 2004, p.7).

My position as researcher in this project was a very particular one. I am a founder and active member of *Koperattiva Rurali Manikata*, a co-operative that was born out of a former activist group campaigning against the building of a golf course and a motor way in the village of Manikata, eating up acres of irrigated farmland in the process. On the other hand I support the Mġarr co-operative by choosing to buy agricultural supplies for myself and for my Manikata co-operative from the Mġarr co-op supplies shop. I also meet Mġarr committee members during the regular meetings at *Koperattivi Malta* where I and the Mġarr representatives are usually quite vocal. In the eyes of interviewees I was not just a researcher but also an activist in the Maltese co-operative and agricultural movement. And I feel that what has come out of this research was about what, how, and why interviewees have learned, as much as about what I, as researcher, have learned, both as activists in our respective co-operatives and in the Maltese co-operative movement as well as participants in this research project. As such, activism and research fed into and informed each other. Jane Thompson (2000) expresses similar feelings when reflecting on her front-line role in women's movements.

> What now appears in this book are reflexive and contingent accounts about a process of personal involvement with others in questions of inequality, class, life politics and the radical potential of education to make a difference – to women in particular. I hope the energy of other women's participation in the project comes through. Re-visiting their influence on my life and intermingling their stories with my own has confirmed how much I have learned – and still learning – from this continuing engagement, in ways that make me doubt, in the event, that what appears here will be my/our final word on the matter (Thompson, 2000, p.176).

This project has offered me the possibility to integrate my academic interests in adult education and community education with my activism in a way that my practice informs my academic work and where my academic work heavily influences my practice. My academic work is deeply rooted in my rural community work. It relates to my previous M.Ed. participatory action research project with Professor Peter Mayo but also my particular interest in Lorenzo Milani and his work in the mountain region of

Barbiana, about which I have conducted research mostly with Carmel Borg and Sandro Caruana, all from the University of Malta. On the other hand, my academic work has helped to give my co-operative a cutting edge when put together with the other members' cultural, professional and experiential baggage, who all contribute very passionately to the Manikata co-operative, making it quite a unique example of a rural co-op in the Maltese co-operative scenario. During the interviews I had the chance we rarely ever have during committee meetings to reflect on our collective practices within the co-operative, on our motivations for involving ourselves in this collective venture, on what we are putting in and on what we are getting out of our activism, about where we would like to take our co-op, and about what co-operation as an ideology and as a structure for agency can do for us. Most of all we had the time to reflect together on what we have learnt from the process at the personal and organizational level. Thompson (2000) again comments on this dialectical, mutually enriching, relationship between doing rigorous academic research and being present on the front line where the events happen. She comments that

> It is a process in which theory cannot be separated from practice. In the end it is necessary to make sense of the world in order to change it. The journey is most likely to be successful when it involves moving others in the process. Others with whom we share common interests and have similar problems to overcome. Others whose condition or experience reveals 'the other' in ourselves and acts to remind us that none of us is free until we are all free (Thompson, 2000, p.178-179).

Hale (2006) agrees with Thompson when he defines activist research as

> a method through which we affirm a political alignment with an organized group of people in struggle and allow dialogue with them to shape each phase of the process, from conception of the research topic to data collection to verification and dissemination of the results (Hale, 2006, p.97).

He also highlights the fact that "Activist research is the effort to externalise the knowledge produced during activism or direct participation" (Hale, 2006, p.99).

On the other hand Hale is also quick to pinpoint the fact that the dialectical relationship between academic research and activism is not an easy ride. Choosing to be immersed in the action and at the same time conducting research from within is meant to lead to a wholly different, sometimes unorthodox way of conducting research and this has its risks since

Activist research involves commitments that are not accountable to arbitration, evaluation, or regulation from within academia. Instead, it requires constant mediation between these two spaces, insisting that one need not choose between them nor collapse one into the other (Hale, 2006, p.100).

Hale argues that

Dual loyalties to an organized group in struggle and to rigorous academic analysis often are not fully compatible with one another. They stand in tension, and at times, the tension turns to outright contradiction (Hale, 2006, p.104).

However, if the right safeguards are taken to ensure transparency and rigour, a unique research project is very likely to result, since

such tension is often highly productive. It not only yields research outcomes that are potentially useful to the political struggle with which one is aligned; but it can also generate new insight and knowledge that challenge and transform conventional academic wisdom (Hale, 2006, p.104-105).

At the bottom line, "Activist research is compromised—but also enriched—by opting to position itself squarely amid the tension between utopian ideals and practical politics" (Hale, 2006, p.100). In my case it was very easy to get emotional about the fact that the activist group that predated the *Koperattiva Rurali Manikata* had managed to build a considerable alliance around it and convince government to shelve its plans for the surroundings of Manikata. The same goes for the Mġarr interviewees. It was very easy to get high on the fact that the committee had managed to get the Minister responsible for agriculture to their offices at Mġarr and speak their mind to him in a way that the Minister and his entourage had never expected. However, it needed greater effort to go beyond petty triumphalism and obtain a critical distance from the event one was deeply immersed in, in order to get to deeper levels of understanding such as: What did everybody involved in these events really learn? What changed after these events with regards to co-op members' empowerment?   What did these events tell about the potential of co-operation to ameliorate people's lives?

The research project has given me a lot of insight into the way people think, dream, act and learn within co-operatives. Coupled with the historical research on the development of co-operatives in the UK, in Europe, the United States and in the British Empire this has made me more aware of the origins of co-operation as an anti-hegemonic voluntary act in people's quest for social justice. It made me aware of how the ideology of co-operation was appropriated by the British Empire as a global structure in order to foster a certain kind of innovative but controlled local

development that would feed into global economic structures without unsettling them. It also enabled me to understand how communities could re-appropriate co-operation for themselves in order to follow their own agenda, which at times runs counter to dominant political and economic forces. In the end it also enabled me to widen my knowledge about co-operatives and the way they work and benefit members and society in general.   This has made my contribution to the Manikata co-operative and to *Koperattivi Malta* more substantive, informed and effective.

5.8   Researcher and researched: generalizing the possibility of struggle

A third issue is that of external validity and generalizability. Campbell (1997) argues that

> qualitative investigation, like biography [...] is not possible to replicate exactly, and it does not claim to be generalizable. It may, however, be much closer to reality as individuals perceive it (Campbell, 1997, p.61).

Cohen et al. (2000) argue that case studies aim at "seeing the situation through the eyes of the participants" (Cohen et al., 2000, p.183). Thus, although rigorous in being scientifically conducted, research through a case study will undoubtedly look out for uniqueness. Writing about qualitative research in the school environment, Giroux (1997) argues that the aim of such research is not to establish positivistic general laws but rather to put research at the service of social justice by analysing power structures and the ways people engage with them. In his own words,

> the discourse of lived cultures needs to interrogate how people create stories, memories, and narratives that posit a sense of determination and agency. This is the cultural 'stuff' of mediation, the conscious and unconscious material through which members of dominant and subordinate groups offer accounts of who they are and present different readings of the world. It is also part of those ideologies and practices that allow us to understand the particular social locations, histories, subjective interests, and private worlds that come into play in any classroom pedagogy (Giroux, 1997, p.205-206).

On the other hand The New Paradigm Research Manifesto (2011) states that

> We are interested in generalization, not in order to make deterministic predictions, but as general statements about power, possibilities and limits of persons acting as agents. We are interested in describing the general patterns within which the particular may exist, and accept that often the most personal and particular is also the most general (New Paradigm Research Group, 2011, p.92).

For my part, the aim of my research project was to enter into a dialogical encounter with people with whom I am involved, particularly within farmers' co-operatives, in order to explore issues of structure and agency and the learning that goes within and around the tension between the two. I hoped to show how the personal and particular, that is people's voices, views, stories, experiences and narratives, though microcosmic, is not fragmented or isolated. Rather, it is part of a larger whole and intersects with higher and wider levels of power that stretch from the co-operative through to local and national loci of power right up to EU level power structures. It was a learning experience that we created while we explored ways how we engaged with structures of power within and without our organisations. Ultimately its generalizability will lie in its ability to enable others in similar situations as ours to see themselves as Freirean "beings in continuous becoming" (Freire, 1990, p.56-57) who are ultimately responsible for their own making and not simply objects who succumb to circumstances. Many stories of people in similar situations put together will be able to testify to the possibility of anti-hegemonic struggle that necessarily characterizes the process of authentic human growth at the individual and collective level.

5.9   Researcher and researched: overcoming reactivity through reflexivity

A fourth issue is internal validity, problems of reactivity and the antidote of reflexivity. According to Punch (1998) reactivity "concerns the extent to which the process of collecting the data changes the data," arguing that the presence of the researcher in qualitative research "may change the behaviour of those being observed, or there may be interviewer effects in the data, as a result of the presence or style of a particular interviewer" (Punch, 1998, p.258). Cohen et al. (2000) agree that in the presence of the researcher "participants behave in particular ways" (Cohen et al., 2000, p.141).

Similarly Scoones (2011) argues that neutral research does not exist. The research situation has its own particular dynamics and characteristics and the roles played by both researcher and researched will unavoidably "affect the information gathered and the analyses carried out" (Scoones, 2011, p.123). According to Maxine Green (1997) qualitative research unveils the fact that in the research process, both researcher and researched recreate their own world through the language and representations they use in the process. In her own words,

Whether we are looking through the lenses of history, or sociology, or psychology, we are attending to beings who are forever incomplete, reaching out to make sense of the actualities of their lives. We can 'catch' some of that incompleteness through participant observation, or through certain modes of listening, or the reading of 'free writing', or by paying heed to the ways in which people move or create images and play. All these are ways of engaging in 'qualitative research'. They all involve interpretation by the researcher or student, from particular standpoints and against the background of accumulated meanings (Green, 1997, p.175).

Both Punch and Cohen et al. agree that this might be unavoidable, but the rigour of the research process can be controlled through reflexivity. According to Punch, reflexivity "refers to the fact that social researchers are part of the world they study" (Punch, 1998, p.171). Cohen et al. agree with this and further comment that "this social world is an already interpreted world by the actors, undermining notions of objective reality" (Cohen et al., 2000, p.141). The authors consider that reflexivity can help to make the research process authentic by suggesting that

researchers should acknowledge and disclose their own selves in the research; [...]. Highly reflexive researchers will be acutely aware of the ways in which their selectivity, perception, background and inductive processes and paradigms shape the research. They are research instruments (Cohen et al., 2000, p.141).

Reflexivity can also turn the subjectivity of both the researcher and the researched and of the research situation in itself from an apparent weak point into the very backbone of the research. Maguire (2011) states that

There is no way to challenge power relationships within the research process, for example power between the researcher and the researched, without also being intentionally self-conscious of our own behaviour in all our social relationships, each of which have power dimensions (Maguire, 2011, p.97).

In this way self-awareness and self-critique will enable the researcher to monitor her behaviour in relation to the interviewee; the latter will be valued not only as a source of information but also as a human being in a situation (the research process) that is intrinsically founded on a relationship of personal trust. Reason (2011) also manages to reconcile the potential benefits of subjectivity inherent in any qualitative research process with the consideration of the research process as a learning opportunity for both researcher and researched. He argues that researchers can

develop their attention so they can look at themselves – their way of being, their intuitions and imaginings, and their beliefs and actions – critically and in this way improve the quality of their claims to fourfold knowing. We call this

'critical subjectivity'; it means that we do not have to throw away our personal, living knowledge in the search for objectivity, but are able to build on it and develop it. We can cultivate a high-quality and valid individual perspective on what there is, in collaboration with others who are doing the same (Reason, 2011, p.105).

This research process was one where together with the interviwees from both case-studies I participated in dialogical processes of varying intensity and depth. We put our own practices under scrutiny in relation to themes and issues borrowed from critical theory and from the concerns of everyday life within the co-op. The research process has been a knowledge-producing exercise, at the academic and the practical and useful level, and at the personal and organisational level.

I feel that with regards to me as an activist in the co-operative movement, being part of the picture enriched the research. However, I am also conscious of the fact that there were underpinnings to it. I conducted the research from a committed position. I am very much in favour of the socialist idea of co-operatives. I think farmers are underdogs in political and social terms; they are not among Malta's poor, but their economic situation is very volatile. I'm all taken up with critical pedagogy in the sphere of adult and community education and I'm heavily influenced by such authors as Freire, Milani, Gramsci and Williams. I also come to the research from a position of power. Within my co-operative I occupied the key post of treasurer on the management committee. I am a founder member and was one of the ring leaders in the anti-golf course and anti-by-pass campaign which predates the founding of the co-operative. Both within my co-operative and also in some circles within the Mġarr Farmers' Co-operative I'm seen as, borrowing from Milani, "the poor man who has been to school" (Milani, 1997, p.105), that is "one from our own ranks, who speaks our language but who has made it at school and who therefore has learned the language of the powerful." This might have conditioned interviewees' responses, especially among the Manikata interviewees.

Trying to get at the interviewees' self-perception in terms of empowerment, I asked them whether they felt comfortable speaking in front of an audience. Most of the Mġarr farmers and one of the Manikata farmers said that when they are in gatherings made up of farmers, they would stand up and speak their mind, even when the Minister of Rural Affairs was present. However, when they are among strangers and professional people they just keep their mouth shut because they suddenly feel that they do not know how to speak the language that is normally associated with formal

situations. I suddenly became conscious of the fact that interviewees might consider the research situation a formal one conducted by a person coming from a position of power (related to my academic background, to my social standing because of my activism, or to my position on the Manikata committee). If this were to be the case, I would suddenly become a threat and the interviewees would feel somehow helpless in expressing themselves in an awkward language they felt should pertain to the interview situation. Or that they could hardly contradict my assumptions during my interviews considering the fact that my assumptions would have obtained unshakeable legitimacy through my social standing as activist. Alternatively it would result in the interviewees not wanting to challenge the legitimacy of somebody who occupied the central role of treasurer on the committee.

Looking back at the interviews and group discussions I conducted during the research, I can identify various situations where interviewees felt threatened and also situations where these problems were overcome by forging a relationship of trust. For the first two interviewees from Mġarr I was considered as an outsider: the first interviewee was new to the committee itself and commented that he was still learning how to participate actively and contribute to the committee meetings. As a matter of fact not much came out of the interview but just enough to start getting some feelers about some crucial issues that were troubling farmers. The second interviewee did not know me and so took his time to warm up to the idea of talking to a stranger about matters concerning his co-operative. But then apparently interviewees started talking to each other about the issues I was raising during the interviews and I could sense that they were coming to the interviews mentally prepared to speak and discuss. My role also changed. In the first interviews I spoke at length about certain issues and then asked interviewees to comment. As the research project developed I spoke always less while the interviewees spoke more. The interviewees' arguments developed from reacting to a half-stranger to producing arguments they would have fleshed out in informal meetings among themselves between one interview and the other. My role also changed, from eliciting information to challenging interviewees' arguments and assumptions.

I was also conscious all along that some Mġarr interviewees were not aware that my family background was very similar to theirs. When I spoke about my recollections of my grandfather's herd of goats, my interviewees seemed to be more at ease, presumably because they could feel that they were speaking to one of their own

ilk who spoke their language. As time passed by they could sense that I was not a threatening outsider from academia, but somebody with whom they could make an argument, share a reflection, challenge an assumption, ask a question.

With the Manikata interviewees I had the benefit of having learned much from the first round of interviews with the members of the Mġarr co-op. Besides, I knew the interviewees much better than the Mġarr ones and they knew me much more than did the Mġarr ones. Thus I could prepare the questions specifically for every particular interviewee. However, familiarity also had its problems. Two interviewees in particular, a farmer and a farmer's wife, were a little bit apprehensive about wanting to 'live up to my expectations' as interviewer and colleague. At the end of the interview they were anxious to know if they had been of any help. Two others, coming from a farming family but both with a tertiary level of education and occupying key posts on the committee, were very ill at ease at the beginning and were afraid they would not live up to expectations because they were more aware than others about what a PhD research entails in terms of academic discourse. However, once they settled into the discussion, and realised that what we were talking about was really our own activism in the co-op, they warmed up to the discussion and expressed themselves quite eloquently. One of them rounded up the interview commenting that he must have spoken too much. During the interview the same person also commented about how he was brought up to feel inferior to his siblings and thus, whenever he is in unfamiliar situations he always feels he is not up to scratch and will need time to persuade himself that he would be able to do well. He said he had to do the same mental effort even during the interview. Others felt at ease right from the beginning, sharing views and opinions, suggesting actions, passing judgements and asking opinions. One interviewee in particular, a very active member of the co-operative though not sitting on the committee, felt that being invited for an interview amounted to an acknowledgement of the important contribution she was giving to co-op life and an affirmation of her strategic standing within the co-op.

5.10   Conclusion

In this chapter I have outlined the method I have followed in going about doing my case study research in Manikata and Mġarr, meeting the activists, employees and members of the management committee of the co-ops from both villages. I argued that the

research process was not a simple fact-finding mission but rather an interactive dialogical process between researcher and researched. The research process was meant to be a learning experience for both, enabling participants to discuss the what, how and why of our participation in co-operative structures that engage with the needs and aspirations of farmers and residents of both rural communities. It was not an aseptic process but one that aimed at understanding the relationship between activism, research and social justice. After giving an overview of the process of how I went about my research process, I then discussed the challenges that such a research process posed. I argued that such a process could only be built on a relationship of trust between research and participants. There was a need for them to get to know me as much as there was a need for me to get to know them and challenge my preconceptions about farmers and co-operators. I had to put my values and beliefs into question as much as I used to question the beliefs and values of the interviewees. I had to be prepared to learn from the process as much as I wish participants to learn from it. This could only take place if we both put each other in a position to afford putting down the defensive barriers and expose ourselves to criticism and debate.

Secondly I argued that I needed to reconcile my role as researcher with my role as activist. I argued that my activism and my research fed into and informed each other in a mutually enriching process, enriching my academic knowledge on the one hand, and making my activism more effective on the other. I argued that this could be possible, among other things, because the trust I managed to generate had enabled me to discuss my own beliefs, values, assumptions, preconceptions and ideals during the dialogical encounters, trying to be as transparent as possible about my ideological positions. Mine was not a 'view from nowhere' but a view that was committed to the idea of co-operation as a worthwhile organisational response to a local community's needs and aspirations. The research process was meant to question that very belief as much as it questioned the what, how and why of interviewees' participation in their respective co-operatives.

Discussing external validity I argued that the research was a qualitative one that went beyond the positivistic notion of replication in order to prove a generalizable statement of fact. Rather, the aim was to explore how in the microcosmic world of two rural villages in the north-western region of the island of Malta, co-operation was utilized as an organisational tool by two local communities in order to engage with powers beyond their reach. The aim was more to explore the idea that grassroots

community agency and structure can offer new possibilities for a world based on social justice.

Finally I turned to internal validity. I argued that reflexivity enabled me to avert problems of reactivity both from participants who might have considered me as a stranger and also from interviewees who were my comrades in the Manikata co-operative or in the Maltese co-operative movement. I discuss how my outlook changed and developed as the interviews progressed and as I moved from one co-op to the other. I also argued that being conscious and reflective about the process enabled me to avert the problems of interviewees who either could feel threatened in my presence as an unknown outsider, or else were upset at wanting to live up to my expectations given that they knew me or were aware of what a PhD research could or was supposed to entail.

In 4.5 above we have seen how acting upon a dispatch sent from the Colonial office to the colonies, the Lieutenant Governor of Malta presented an ordinance for approval by the Council of Government for the setting up of a co-operatives' Registrar Office on the island. We also saw how on the same day of its approval in December 1946, the young Maltese civil servant Oscar Paris was appointed Registrar. Following his groundwork in the rural villages in January 1947 the first co-operative was registered.

In the following three chapters I will be analysing two co-operatives. One of them is the Mġarr Farmers' Co-operative Society (MFCS), set up in 1947 and registered by Registrar Paris. The second co-operative was set up sixty years later in 2007, not on the initiative of the Registrar handpicked by the Lieutenant Governor, but on the initiative of a small group of people who for two years had struggled to convince the Maltese Government that if it went ahead with its plans for a golf course and a motor-way, it would obliterate a whole village and its way of life. This is the *Koperattiva Rurali Manikata* (KRM). MFCS had an all-male management committee, made up of full-time farmers, and had a couple of full-time employees including a female manager. KRM had a mixed gender management committee made up of farmers and residents with at least two females occupying key posts on the committee and fulfilling key roles as part-time employees. The MFCS committee was made up of full-time farmers whose formal education had not gone beyond compulsory schooling. Most of the committee members of KRM had gone into further and tertiary education and came from different full-time

job experiences. While MFCS had been set up on the initiative of the authorities, the local Mġarr community had slowly owned up to the co-op and turned it into an organisational tool to address local needs, mainly to set up a consumer-owned agricultural supplies shop, to offer training and to do advocacy on behalf of the local farmers. The neighbouring Manikata community had set up the co-op as a way of keeping the spirit of the anti-golf course and anti-by-pass struggle alive and use the sense of agency created in the campaign to propose and implement community based development projects that would safeguard the local environment, enabling locals and outsiders to enjoy that environment. It also aimed at offering training opportunities for its members and also enabling local farmers to sell their produce directly to customers. At MFCS there was a clear distinction between the management and the employees and everything that happened within the co-op depended on the ability of both sides to build trust in each other. At KRM most of the part-time employees were themselves members of the committee.

In the following chapters I will analyse the learning that occurs in and around both co-operatives at various levels. I will ask and try to answer three very basic questions. Firstly, what do farmers, residents, members of the management committee, part-time and full-time employees as well as volunteers learn when they participate *in* co-op life? That is, what do people learn while participating in the running of the co-op, as elected members of the management committee, as employees or as volunteers? Secondly, what do these same people, as well as customers, the local community or policy makers learn *from* the co-operative's actions mostly in terms of non-formal and informal learning? Finally I discuss the question of what has been learned to make the case *for* co-operation as a political tool that enables communities to envision and create alternative ways of living where they can exert more control over their individual and collective lives.

In the next chapter I will discuss the first case study, Mġarr Farmers' Co-operative Society (MFCS) Ltd., touching base with farmers, community leaders and employees.

Chapter 6

The first case study: the Mġarr Farmers' Co-operative Society

6.1   Introduction

In this chapter I will take a look at Mġarr Farmers' Co-operative Society (MFCS). I will first discuss the aims of the co-operative and the reasons people still feel that they should belong to it, notwithstanding the fact that the social, political and economic context had changed so much since its setting up in 1947. I will then give an overview of the interviewees, what makes them similar and what makes them different in terms of age, gender and formal education. I also discuss how these similarities and differences intersect with their roles within the co-operative. Next I discuss what has been learned by the farmers sitting on the management committee as well as by the full-time and part-time employees of MFCS from their paid or voluntary participation in the co-op. Next I analyse how the well-prepared employees of MFCS have managed to initiate processes of non-formal and informal learning within the co-op, for the benefit of members of the management committee as well as the general membership and the client base of the organisation. Finally I discuss the challenges which the farmers of Mġarr were facing at the time of the research and how those involved in the research project made the co-operative model work for them as they faced the challenges as farmers, as members of the rural community in which they lived and as individuals. I explore where the co-op model was successful, where it had potential to bring about change, and where it had failed.

6.2   Mġarr Farmers' Co-operative Society Ltd

Mġarr is a small rural village to the north-west of Malta, surrounded by fertile irrigated valleys, with a population of about 3,500 people (Deguara, 1999, p.380, National Statistics Office, 2013, no pagination). The Mġarr Farmers' Co-operative (MFCS) was set up in 1947. A group of local farmers met in a local tea shop in 1946 in order to test out the idea. Eventually MFCS was registered on the 24th of July 1947. The initial steering committee lobbied the village farming community and a first general meeting was held on the 18th of March 1948. The founding members of the co-operative were twelve farmers, ten men and two women. Seven of these were elected to the first management committee. The first decision taken in the first annual general meeting was that MFCS should enrol in the Farmers' Central Co-operative Society (FCCS) so that Mġarr Farmers could sell their produce at the FCCS sheds at the Marsa and Birkirkara fruit and vegetable markets. This enabled MFCS to receive a commission on the sales of Mġarr farmers at the FCCS outlets and thus secure some income to support the running of the co-operative. Soon after, the Mġarr co-operative started selling fodder and fertilizer to its members. This helped to raise income for the co-op (*The Start of Mgarr Farmers Cooperative*, 2014, no pagination). In 1976 the co-operative bought a plot of land in Mġarr where it built an agricultural supplies outlet, an administrative unit, a meeting hall and a coffee shop. The building was financed by the government, by a church organisation, and by contributions from the members (Baldacchino, 2007, p.6-7). Today MFCS has 186 members[2] and employs two people in its agricultural supplies outlet on a full-time basis and two others on part-time or occasional basis. It also rents out the coffee shop space which has now become a restaurant and take-away. Both the historical information found on the co-operative's website and in Baldacchino's 2007 commemorative book is typically celebratory. Galea (2012, p.53) is more sober in his account and refers to the initial difficulties which the Mġarr co-op found itself in. Interviewees spoke of a time when the co-op had to borrow money from its members in order to pay for debt incurred in purchasing stock for the shop. Over the years, as the number of goats and sheep reared in rural communities decreased, the Mġarr co-op outlet changed its nature from an animal food store to an agricultural supplies shop. The shop today is a successful business venture, supplying farmers with most of their needs to run their family farms.

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[2] Information supplied by Koperattivi Malta on 06.07.2011

6.3   What do we get if we belong? Four different aims for toiling in or belonging to MFCS

An employee of the co-op highlighted the characteristics that make the Mġarr co-op a unique organization:

> our main concern is retailing, but I'll never forget we're also a co-op... If, for example, we're going to organize courses on the use of pesticides [...], I'm not going to say that it's too much work. No, that's a service I have to provide, because we need to make a difference. We're here to give a service to our members. If you take that away, what kind of co-operative are we? With regards to other things, for the part of the committee, they work hard as a co-operative to tackle problems. You cannot be indifferent or be after your own interests. You have to look after the interests of all the farmers, the general interest. And that's what keeps our co-operative alive, in comparison to others that have faded away.

Thus while for the outsider the co-operative is synonymous with the agricultural supplies shop and the adjoining restaurant, for its members, employees and committee the co-op's raison d'être is at least four-fold.

Firstly, members of the co-op are able to sell their produce at the FCCS shed at the Ta' Qali Central Market. Another raison d'être of MFCS is the running of a one-stop-shop that caters for the needs of Mġarr farmers. The third raison d'être of the co-op is the organisation of courses, mostly aimed at helping farmers understand EU laws transposed into Maltese legislation after Malta's accession to the EU in 2004. The fourth raison d'être of the co-op is the campaigning and advocating for farmers at the national level.

With regards to the first raison d'être, the members of the Mġarr co-operative have revealed themselves to be fiercely independent, mostly full-time farmers managing family farms. It is a community of equals in socio-economic terms where business acumen and physical stamina are distinguishing features of farmers who still believe that farming can be a sustainable occupation in the face of rising challenges. A farmer argued,

> When they started spreading the word that, now that we are part of the EU, we will have to get together and decide as a group on what we're going to do and not to do... How can that be? Is my field like yours? It depends on the weather, on my capabilities... If I'm capable of working ten tumuli of land, how is it that you come and order me to work only three? Everybody looks after his own

business… individually… You know your own things, what capability you have, your work and your lands. You cannot dictate.

Members of the co-op have access to the FCCS middlemen at the Central Market since only members of primary farmers' co-ops can sell their produce through the FCCS shed.   But the co-op is expected to refrain from intervening in the way farmers manage their farms. On the one hand the farmers consider themselves to be independent entrepreneurs, competing with each other on the market and holding their individual business plans close to their chest. On the other hand they came together to set up and run a community-based co-operative that enabled them to sell their products through FCCS. It is a paradoxical situation lived in the tension between belonging to an egalitarian social enterprise and preserving one's independence as an entrepreneur.

The second raison d'être is the running of the co-op store. The committee and the two employees at the shop have learned how to run an enterprise that helped farmers meet some of the most pressing challenges they faced at the moment. Among these were diminishing profits, long working hours and the need to fill up of a variety of administrative forms. Importing most of its supplies directly from abroad, the co-op was able to sell agricultural supplies at reduced prices. Over and above this, members get an annual dividend based on the amount of purchases they make from the store. A well-stocked shop right in the heart of Mġarr means farmers can save a lot of precious time. The sales persons are technically well prepared to help the farmers fill in most of the forms they receive from the Agriculture Department and from other entities. These services expand organically in response to the changing scenario in which the farmers and the co-op operate. The committee and the employees often discuss with each other about developing the operations of the co-op store in order to be able to respond better to farmers' changing needs.

There are four employees who are an essential part of the co-op community; two of them are also members of the co-op. The four of them are involved in the running of the shop doing anything from dealing with foreign and local suppliers, dealing with customers, putting the warehouses in order, attending agricultural fairs in different countries and keeping the co-op's accounts. Two of them also help out in the paperwork related to the committee and also represent the committee as delegates in meetings organized by different authorities. They also share in the reflective processes that go on in the committee room. Their learning stems from having to deal with

different people with differing needs over the counter. It is also the result of having to deal with full-time farmers sitting on the management committee and whose views regarding the co-op shop are influenced not only by customers' concerns but also by concerns of moral and legal responsibility. The participation in the dialogical process that goes on between the committee room and the co-op store beneath is thus one open to a number of people who are either elected by the co-op members to sit on the management committee or are employees handpicked by the elected committee for their abilities.

Until some years ago most of the paperwork and accounting were done by people sent over by FCCS, namely an accountant and a committee clerk. At one point FCCS decided to start importing agricultural supplies in bulk. As a result FCCS became a competitor of MFCS. There was the danger that sensitive commercial information would be leaked to FCCS. Core business details became a contested terrain and MFCS decided to do away with book keeping and clerical help from FCCS and go it alone in this respect. In the words of one of the interviewees, the committee decided that "They would only take on people from Mġarr or engage people whom they could trust." This is considered as a watershed episode in the recent history of the co-op; both employees and committee members feel that now that they depend on persons of trust from Mġarr they have more control over their operations, know where they stand with their finances and also know how to invest profits, channelling surplus into dividends to co-op store patrons, into capital investment and into training initiatives.

A third raison d'être of the coop is the organisation of training courses. Most of the courses are informative in nature and are organised by the co-op in order to enable members to keep abreast of legal developments emanating from the adoption of EU legislation. However, the employees also use their social and business connections to bring experts over to Mġarr either to give formal lectures or seminars, or to visit the fields. Some of these experts are sent over by the suppliers of strawberry plants which the co-operative imports in large quantities from Italy and Spain. These give technical advice to farmers on how to get the best results from the cultivation of different strawberry plant varieties. In this way, the co-op shop business enterprise funds training in the sense that some of the profits from the shop are eventually invested in the hiring of experts to give training sessions. Sometimes the employees at the co-op store organise training visits to the suppliers in Italy. In this way, the retailing, training

and management functions are integrated and feed into each other. As one employee said,

> Until last year, notwithstanding these times [of economic slowdown], we have increased sales. It's already a very good thing if you manage to keep sales at the same level nowadays, let alone if you keep increasing them. I'm not speaking about profits. Profits are a different thing; it's that you're increasing sales. Because when you are providing other services, offering courses and similar things, those become a burden. On the other hand, if you're a co-op you cannot be only after profit.

The fourth raison d'être of the co-operative is advocacy. An interviewee argued that although he is not on the committee, he knows that whenever he has an issue with the authorities, a new law, a new problem to put up with because of political decisions, there is a co-op within the farming community that can listen to his concerns and take up those concerns with the authorities. Farmers do not have a strong vociferous lobby group in Malta and the lack of trust between farmers in Malta is proverbial. As the Mġarr interviewees claim, farmers see themselves as competitors on the market rather than comrades. A farmer was very blunt about this. He considered farmers' co-operatives in Malta as attempts at uniting farmers but in reality,

> The most difficult thing is for farmers to work together; that's the most difficult thing. [...] There's a lot of envy, one against the other, and this one against that one. That's how it is. You can never come to an agreement. Farmers will never get together. That's for certain, because we know how they are. [...] It's difficult. Difficult. Very difficult.

The interviewee spoke as if the challenges farmers were facing, rather than bringing people together to act, have pushed farmers to the defensive, putting up fences to protect their individual patch at the production level. But paradoxically the co-operative structure at Mġarr has garnered a respectable level of trust among members, mostly based on the committee's and the employees' ability to run a successful co-op store, a characteristic that according to one of the employees, puts the Mġarr co-op above all the other primary co-ops within FCCS. Members look up to the committee to speak on their behalf. Operating within clear-cut parameters that never impinge upon the business decisions that members take with regards their family farms, the Mġarr co-operative banks upon the skills and competences but above all upon the sense of agency and empowerment gained from its ability to run a community-owned successful business venture in order to help the farmers to raise issues with the authorities, participating in meetings organised by the Agriculture Department, other government

agencies, *Koperattivi Malta*, and by FCCS. Sometimes the committee also asks for meetings with the authorities to raise particular issues. In 2012 the committee, aided by two of its employees, met a delegation led by the Minister for Resources and Rural Affairs and which included the Director of Agriculture and the Permanent Secretary (executive head) of the Ministry. It also met a delegation led by the Opposition's Shadow Minister for Agriculture. Both meetings took place on request by the committee. A number of issues were raised during the meetings, particularly the adoption of the EU Nitrates Directive and its transposition into Maltese law. The interviewees all took pride in the fact that the co-op was outspoken on various issues but lamented the fact that it was only the Mġarr co-op that spoke up for Maltese farmers.

Sometimes members of the committee either don't have the time or else don't feel competent enough to attend certain meetings. Thus they may decide to send one of the employees to represent them. Thus money made from the shop is used to pay one of the employees to represent the co-op in fora outside the co-op. An employee argued that the more profits are made from the shop, the more the committee would be in a position to employ persons whose job would be to speak out for the farmers. On the other hand, the committee members all took pride in their ability to speak their mind to the Minister. The two employees who were involved in the process of helping the committee to prepare for the meetings with the Minister and with the Shadow Minister, said that the process was one where all the members of the committee were involved. They agreed not only on a set of issues to be tackled during the meetings but also on the way the meetings were to proceed. Given the participative process followed throughout, all involved expressed great satisfaction. They felt empowered to act, to speak out, to believe that their voice could be heard, that they could summon the authorities to their offices in Mġarr and make them listen to what they had to say about the way regulations and laws drafted in Brussels were seemingly adopted uncritically and unquestioningly by the Valletta government.

6.4   The interviewees - age, gender and education: working within and outside stereotypes

The ten Mġarr interviewees consisted of two full-time employees, one part-time employee, as well as seven full-time farmers made up of five committee members, one

ordinary member and the wife of another ordinary member. Eight interviewees were males and two were females. The gender bias reflects the dominance of males in the membership base of the co-operative. This does not mean that women are absent in agriculture. A full time-male farmer said that "If, in agricultural work, you don't have a wife that helps you, you won't make it. That's how it is with me… And it's not just me; everybody says that." Another interviewee runs the family farm together with his brother. He said that he gets occasional help from his wife and added that, "My two sisters are partners with us in the cultivation of strawberries. We plant them in our fields, we cultivate them and we give them their share, and then they help us."

However, women are quite invisible in part of the management structure of the co-operative. For example, since the setting up of the co-op in 1947, the management committee has always been an all-male forum elected by the male membership base of the co-op during annual general meetings.

On the other hand, one of the two full-time employees is a female and is considered to be the lynchpin of the co-op. She manages the finances of the co-operative and deals with the foreign suppliers of the store. A farmer remarked that, "We thank God Rose is there because she works really hard there." However, a farmer observed that Rose had to win the all-male committee's trust in order to become a major factor in the co-operative's financial turnaround. The interviewee observed that

> Rose had been long trying to import things and so on; but she found people who threw obstacles in her way, and did not want her [to do so], from within the co-op itself. But at the end she made it, and we did well. It's good that you go to the shop and find everything. Why do you have to go around buying a little bit from here, a little bit from there, when you can import it yourself? What I mean is that it is difficult for a woman. They did not want to accept certain things which Rose used to propose. Maybe because they were proposed by a woman, you know… That's why I said it's difficult for a woman. It's not that easy for a woman to get herself in. It seems like they don't trust a woman, women, enough. Forget about the fact that she may have better brains than somebody else to manage things and everything.

This throws light on the interpretation of co-ops as democratic spaces. Members of the co-op bring with them the cultural baggage into the annual general meetings and into the meetings of the management committee. The co-op seems to be a men's affair and hardly any women are members of the co-op in their own right. This means that they cannot even stand for elections and are automatically shut out of the committee room. A female full-time farmer said how she attends the co-op meetings in

her husband's stead because her husband is not one who feels comfortable to speak in front of an audience. At the same time the co-op accepts that, as his wife, she is entitled to attend even if technically she is not a paid-up member.

The age of the interviewees reflects the difficulty that farming families are finding in recruiting new family members into the family farms.

Figure 9. The ten Mġarr interviewees

Age	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69
No. of interviewees	1	1	4	2	2

In part this is related to the social status farmers enjoy, and the way agriculture is seen as an occupation for people who did not make it at school. Proceeding to higher education and becoming a farmer seem to be two mutually exclusive choices.

It is very striking to see how the seven farmers interviewed shared strikingly similar school experiences. Three said they enjoyed school as long as it lasted. An interviewee from a rural hamlet just outside Mġarr, said that "I was happy at school, we were co-educational [at the time there were boys' primary schools and girls' primary schools in the larger villages]." Three others said they did not like it at all. Another one even said that the thing he remembered most from his secondary school days were the brawls he used to get involved in while standing up for his friends. Another one spoke of the years in school as very lonely, almost bewildering. In his own words,

> There were three classes [in a hamlet on the hills, just outside Mġarr]. So the teacher [a Catholic priest] used to teach a little bit here and a little bit there. And most of the time he would put us in his car and drive us around. When we moved to the school at [a larger village] I used to shy away from other children. I was too shy to ask questions. And I never asked anything. When I'd see the other children, I'd feel uneasy, I didn't even play with them sometimes. And while I waited for the school bus […] I was always weeping because I didn't want to go to school.

The three elderly interviewees left school at fourteen, which was the end of compulsory school age at the time. Out of the remaining four interviewees, only one finished Form Five, the last year of the secondary school. One left school when still fifteen; the other

two did not even start Form Five because they turned sixteen when they were still in Form Four.

One said,

> I was supposed to stay until sixteen but I left a year earlier. My father went to Australia for six months and that was just what I needed... I brought up that excuse; I needed to give a hand on the farm.

Another one said that "I learned as much as I could, that's it, and that was enough. I didn't even sit for the O'Levels. I didn't want to know." Both are in their mid fifties. Another interviewee in his early twenties stated in very similar language, "As soon as I turned sixteen I left. I was still in form four. I didn't do the form five." The almost echoing words speak of cultural reproduction in a rural sub-culture that replicates itself over the span of decades, in which the dichotomy between school success and the family farm seems to be unbridgeable.

The interviewees gave different answers to explain why not one of them managed to sit successfully for a single O-Level at the end of the secondary school and why they decided to leave school as soon as the chance offered itself. One blamed his parents, arguing that

> My father always had his mind set on the fact that I'll be joining the family farm. I always had that in mind. It never occurred to me that I'd stay on at school. Even if the possibility existed, it never occurred to me. Your mind would always be set on the family farm. That's how I was set in those days. That's how it is. So you won't have anybody to guide you. Your father wouldn't care about your schooling, your mother wouldn't care about your schooling, and that's just what you need not to care about your schooling.

Another one said that his mind was set on other things at the time of leaving school. In his own words, "I liked hunting and bird trapping and fishing. In those days I was enthusiastic about these things." Another one blamed his poor memory, arguing that "If your mind is not set for those things... I used to remember things for the moment and then forget everything soon afterwards. My mind was good at other things..." Another one put the blame squarely on himself, saying that "I did not learn because there's something about me... The teachers used to do their best for all I know." The same interviewee spoke in similar words about his own son's school experience, implying that his son was well on the way to being a school failure himself and would thus have no option but to become a farmer in due course.

All of the eight interviewees who left school without any formal qualifications, all said that now, with the benefit of hindsight, they would have preferred to have done better at school. Mikiel (Michael) said that at the time of leaving school at fourteen it didn't dawn on him that

> school might be that much useful for my future, let's put it this way. I thought that with what I had learned I would have been able to work. And in fact I did work. But if I had learned a little bit more it would have been very beneficial to me because with regards to certain things about which I usually seek advice, I would have been able to solve them myself; not everything, but you would be able to solve most of them on your own; you wouldn't go to anybody else for advice on what a certain document is, what it means or doesn't mean.

Similarly, one full-time employee said he did not finish secondary school and as soon as he turned sixteen he left to take up a job with a construction firm. On the other hand John, a part-time employee at the co-op in his late thirties said that he did well at school. He studied for a college diploma in agriculture and later did an undergraduate diploma in the same sector. Then he was offered the opportunity to top-up his diploma and obtain a first degree in agricultural sciences. He stated that his parents

> didn't want me to go for agriculture in the first place. I kept insisting I wanted to study agriculture. They wanted me to work somewhere else; they didn't want agriculture. I always wanted agriculture, and that's what I did.

But somehow he perpetuates the idea that obtaining a degree and working on a farm do not go together. In fact his full-time job is with the Agriculture Department where he occupies a managerial post. His success at school, coming from a family of full-time and part-time farmers, is an exception to the rule of cultural and social reproduction and his parents' insistence on moving away from agriculture goes to show that the idea that farming is mostly for school failures is still strong. On the other hand Rose, in her early forties, daughter of a full-time farmer, obtained a college diploma in accounts and did different jobs within the public and the private sector. When her husband was employed by the co-op to take up the management of the co-op store, she was roped in to help in bookkeeping.

All the seven farmers interviewed agreed that they had learned the farming trade informally from the family; the oldest two said that they also attended seminars and courses related to agriculture, organised by the government decades ago. Six of them said they regularly attended meetings, seminars or courses organised by the co-op. But they all emphasized that the most crucial learning experience is the point when

you take the plunge and set up your own farm or take on the running of the family farm. In order to survive in a very competitive environment you need to keep abreast of the latest technological developments. Thus the farmer needs to have a positive attitude towards learning but also towards the taking of risks. This was summarised by one of the interviewees who said,

> I learned from my father, but then, in order to move on, buy more land, and build greenhouses, you have to learn on your own. You must have the courage to move on and never give up. And you learn.

Farmers also learn to change and to take risks by learning from each other. As one interviewee said,

> There was a time when they started using these plastic tunnels. At first you would feel a little awkward, and you would say: am I going to do that? But then, when you see that others are doing well, you find yourself doing like them.

Two farmers also said that they learn when they go abroad to visit farmers and suppliers. Some of these visits are organised by the co-op.

Farmers associated certain kind of higher order learning with schooling. And they considered it to be out of their reach. They then spoke of another kind of learning, of a lower status, that is more hands-on, developed through practice, through asking other farmers, through seeing and touching, through dirtying one's hand in the wet soil. And they thought they were quite good at this. However, they were also aware that this kind of learning was not enough if they did not possess a command over the language and discourse of science, technology, laws and regulations, in short, the language of dominant power. And that is where they felt they were dependent on others, in challenging authority.

And it was precisely at the point when the co-op decided to bank upon the technical and scholarly expertise of Rose and John, both coming from Mġarr farming families and both having experienced success at school and in their full-time jobs outside of family farms, that the co-op experienced a turnaround in its fortunes. That was the moment the co-op had broken away from a culture of *unscholarly* farmers' internalized helpless dependency on *scholarly* outsiders, turning to *scholars* from within its own fold to map a new way forward for their community enterprise.

6.5   Learning *in* the co-op: the co-operative as a participative learning community

6.5.1   Learning in the co-op: Committee members

Farmers' primary co-ops within FCCS use a ballot system whereby every year before the annual general meeting, members of the management committee take it in turns to resign from the committee, two every year, on a first-in-first-out basis. Committee members who tender their resignation have the right to stand for re-election. Judging by the word of the interviewed committee members, very few put their names to participate in the election. The turnover within the MFCS committee is very low and the ages of the members vary from early forties to late sixties.

Elected members do not receive any formal training to be able to become active committee members. But they have constructed their own meaning of what it is to learn through participation *in* the co-op committee, mainly through an "apprenticeship" period alongside the more experienced comrades. A first essential skill they learn is the ability to listen to others, learning from their long experience and in a way acknowledging their selfless dedication. As one of the interviewees said,

> At first, when I was elected, I used to stay still, I didn't say anything. For the first year or two, you have the committee members who were there before you... All of them had been there for years. They start debating and you stay still and don't say anything. And this doesn't go on for a short time; you'll have to do this for a long time. But then you start learning.

An interviewee, who is not a member of the committee, remarked that farmers do not trust each other and hardly ever agree among themselves. During the group interview it was very evident that MFCS also had difficulty in co-operating with other co-ops within the FCCS network, even because the financial and managerial performance of MFCS by far outclasses the other co-ops, some of which were described as moribund or dead. However, within the committee of MFCS there seems to be a feeling of camaraderie that defies the general perception. Members of the committee learn from each other's experience not only because they learn to listen but also because they learn to trust. The latest newcomer to the committee said expressly, "You trust them because they are experienced." To learn while listening also means that you embrace an attitude of openness to change, particularly in the way of viewing and analysing realities around you. An interviewee said that after taking an active part in co-op life,

one would notice that "look, I did not think things through in the way that other person does. And I think that person is actually right. You learn."

When new entrants get their fair share of apprenticeship they slowly start getting into the fray. When asked about whether he had learned anything from his long participation in the committee, an interviewee said, "I learned I'm able to speak, I don't feel awkward about it. I think that's the main thing. You learn how to speak." The interviewees had no qualms about the fact that committee debates are not always plain sailing. One said that

> we have arguments, many arguments, in the committee. And that's why the committee remains alive, because there would be those arguments. If there are no arguments it won't remain alive.

Another interviewee said that "sometimes emotions run high. Sometimes comments go overboard so to speak. But nonetheless, the outcome will be positive." He also argued that "that's what you learn on the committee; you face others and you fight, and not be afraid to do it." Similarly, another interviewee argued very passionately that one of his comrades on the committee,

> is very alert [...] He is a fighter and speaks his mind, because Mikiel does not work for his own gain. Whatever Mikiel does he does it for the good of the co-op. I'm sure of that.

Learning to speak and to do so assertively also entails the ability to learn how to accept differing opinions. As an interviewee put it, "you need to accept other people's opinions, even though you might judge other persons' opinions negatively. But you need to accept."

Mikiel, a prominent member of the committee, pointed out that not only you need to know *how* to speak but you also need to know *what* to say. Put in another way, participation in the co-op enables you to learn to speak, but also to speak out in an informed and effective way. He argued that this skill is learned through involvement not only in committee meetings but also in other fora outside the co-op over a long stretch of time. He commented upon the fact that he saw a difference between "the way I speak now and the way I used to speak, let's say, thirty years ago." The knowledge one gains from activism, coupled with an ability to speak out, becomes what he terms as a "weapon". On the other hand, "if you wouldn't be active you wouldn't have the

weapon. Even if you're able to speak, you wouldn't be able to speak in the right manner."

What do people do with what they learn in the co-op? Learning to listen, to trust, to be open to new ways of looking at the world, to speak, and to do so effectively, will ultimately enable a committee member to be a voice for Mġarr and for Maltese farmers in different fora and at different political levels. When asked what he has learned from his years sitting on the co-op committee an interviewee said that

> what I've learned is how you have to defend the farmer a little bit... You listen to the farmers' complaints. The farmers' complaints are our complaints; you take them before the committee, we discuss them, and when we see that there are good points, we send them out; we send letters to whoever is concerned. Or if needs be we bring a representative [from the respective authority] and the farmers come over and we discuss and meet...

The ability to speak does not remain a personal affair but becomes a political tool in the hands of co-operative activists who seem to be sharpening their rough words into *weapons*, to use Mikiel's metaphor. The *weapon* would be used to fight, to enable farmers face numerous challenges, primarily the transition from an island economy to one that is forced to uncomfortably fit into the EU economic model.

They felt that this energy to debate, to contradict each other, but also to agree on collective action and to act, gave them a sense of pride in what they were capable of doing as a co-op. But they also regretted that when it came to advocating for farmers' rights, they were a lone voice. The MFCS delegate on the FCCS central committee spoke of resistance from among the delegates of the other co-operatives to initiatives taken by MFCS, such as when MFCS took the initiative to help its members seek financial compensation from government for large-scale damage caused by an exceptional hail-storm in the North-Western region. Two interviewees said that when an MFCS delegate at FCCS occupied the post of president of FCCS, he tried to bring together the different farmers' organisations in Malta. But he met a lot of resistance within FCCS and was eventually forced to resign.

Maltese farmers are far from developing a hegemonic position in Maltese society. However, the sense of pride with which the Mġarr interviewees spoke about their advocacy work hints at emergent 'structures of feeling' among the Mġarr farmers that are marked by a sense of being an oppositional voice, working against all odds,

engaging impervious dominant, powerful structures that are numb to the Maltese farmer's plight. There is frustration at being unable to mobilise a wider community of Maltese farmers, some of whom would not want to engage with reality but simply want the authorities to do something for them. The Mġarr co-operators seem to want to plod on, to find a way forward to survive, and to survive together. The advocacy praxis is developing into 'structures of feeling' characterised by a sense of consciousness about the long list of overwhelming challenges farmers are facing at present. But they are also 'structures of feeling' marked by empowerment, an acknowledgement of the fact that these problems cannot just be accepted as a matter of fact. The 'structures of feeling' among the members of the committee are marked by a sense of frustration at being short changed by the national and EU legislators but also by a sense that their voice cannot be ignored. But for their work to be more effective they need to build bridges with other farmers' co-ops and farmers' organizations; so far their efforts in this direction have failed bitterly.

6.5.2   Learning in the co-op: the employees

The employees said that they had attended various training courses, including one which was essential for them to be able to sell pesticides from the shop. However, the job is a learning experience in itself. One said, "I've learned a lot since I came here. I didn't know what a computer was. We learned how to use it over here." He also learned how to drive the fork lifter, essential to keep the stores well organized. The employees also mentioned how they also learned to deal with customers, selling products but also giving all the information related to the products they sell. This kind of customer service requires from the employees a positive attitude towards learning since they need to keep themselves up-to-date. Asked about where they get the information they give to customers, an employee said that they look up labels, they ask their suppliers, and they also resort to specialized books and internet sites. They also get expert technical advice regarding fertilization plans. The employees' learning is framed within a sense of commitment towards co-op members. They feel that they are not just selling products but giving a service; and this gives them a cutting edge over competing private businesses.

The committee assistant argued that since he handled correspondence, he kept abreast of what went on in the agricultural sector with regards to policy at national and at EU level. Handling correspondence from CopaCogeca, the federation of European

farmers' associations and co-operatives was vital since he would know "what they're negotiating about, their bargaining." On the other hand, being present in committee meetings helped him to look at things from a farmer's perspective, understanding why they take certain stands on a number of issues.

A job at the co-op is an interesting learning experience also for the employee's children. One of the employees argued that her children get involved in the varied experiences related to her job. They ask her questions about how she is doing in her meetings, or how a particular project was developing. As a mother she acknowledged that the co-op had been very helpful in giving her the possibility to work flexible hours because this enabled her to put up with her children's needs, and also with her own needs as a lifelong learner. She said that had she remained at home, her life would have stagnated. But thanks to her interesting job she kept herself abreast of things. On the flip side, there are times when the children have to bear with her. She mentioned that when thousands of strawberry plants arrive from abroad in the autumn, she remains at the co-op store till the early hours of the morning. But the rewards outweigh the sacrifices, arguing that her children "learn with you from your experiences; there's always that information flowing in."

6.6   Learning *from* the Co-op: the employees as educators

The employees at MFCS occupy a critical space and place that enables them to contribute to the education of farmers, members and non-members, who shop at the co-op store. At a very basic level they educate customers by giving them all the necessary information related to the use of pesticides, fertilizers, irrigation systems and new strawberry plant varieties among other things. To do this the employees do not only need to be knowledgeable about technical matters related to agriculture but also be able to speak the farmers' language.

In this respect, they are unique persons who have the cultural capital usually associated with people who have been a school success. One of the full-time employees has a college diploma in accounts and prior to her employment with the co-op used to work in different places managing offices, keeping accounts and handling imports. The part-time committee assistant is a graduate in agricultural sciences and occupies a managerial post within the Department of Agriculture. Both come from farming families and work in the family fields in their free time. Their cultural baggage is

enriched not only with academic, technical, culturally mainstreamed knowledge but also with hands-on knowledge acquired on the job or in the fields. They are conversant with both legitimated knowledge packaged in powerful political, economic and technical discourse, and with the non-legitimated discourse learned while walking barefoot in the wet soil. Their own community has taught them the farmers' language. Their schooling and work experiences have taught them the language of power. Their involvement in the co-op has enabled the co-op to cut short its dependence on traditional intellectuals who came in the form of professional accountants or accounts clerks sent over from FCCS. Their place has been filled by managers who hail from the farming community itself and have the progress and development of the community-based co-op at heart. They are organic intellectuals who are placed at the critical inter-connecting junction between political power residing in Valletta and Brussels and the small farming community of Mġarr. As argued by Freire (1998), they are both persons who have "appropriated" what they have learned, and re-invented it by applying it to "concrete existential situations" (Freire, 1998, p.101).

The employees use their excellent position to influence what goes on in the committee. They pass on suggestions for action that spring mainly from the fact that they are in constant contact with farmers over the counter at the store. They are in a position to know about farmers' problems and to be sensitized to the fact that something needs to be done about them. Secondly the employees handle most of the correspondence coming from the authorities, from the co-operatives' federation *Koperattivi Malta*, the Central Co-operatives' Fund, the Co-operatives Board, CopaCogeca and other agencies. They are thus placed at the crossroads of information channels with regards to laws, policies and sectorial advocacy and lobbying campaigns at local and European level. This leads them to propose suggestions about how to inform farmers about new regulations and to empower the committee to stand up and oppose policies which they think go against the interests of the farmers.

When suggestions are put to the committee, the farmers discuss them with the help of the assistant. Some of the committee members have been actively involved for a long time in managing the co-op, in representing the co-op in other fora and in advocating for farmers. During the last five years this experience has been greatly enriched by the present team of well prepared and dedicated employees. The committee members' way of looking at the coop's business, as well as its mediating role between policy makers and Mġarr farmers, has been continually challenged. Employees

suggested that the committee have had to take their time to strike a working relationship with the employees. One of the employees said that "at first they deem our ideas as strange, but then when they see that things start to work out they start to trust us."

An employee argued that since he took over the running of the co-op store he has helped the committee to have a much better organised outlet with well-stocked and organised warehouses, enabling the co-op's business to evolve and progress both in terms of service to customers and in terms of increasing turnover. The other two employees argued that they have enabled the committee to develop their dialogical skills, both orally and in writing. One of the farmers described how the committee assistant enables the committee to voice their views. He describes the process very clearly:

> We speak [...]. And then we make our points, and then there will be our secretary and he writes a letter as it should be done. [...] And he writes a letter, and then he shows it to us before sending it. We read it, and if we see that it's good that's ok; or else if we want to add or remove anything we tell him, he goes over it again, and then he sends it. But it's always us who come up with the points.

The committee have learned from their employees about how to create a symbiosis between the assistant's dexterity in handling officious discourse, and the committee's arguments grounded in their experience as full-time farmers. At the same time they have kept control over the process, having the last say over what is put into writing.

The employees also help the committee to learn how to sharpen their oral dialectical skills. All the interviewed committee members and employees proudly mentioned two meetings they had, one with the Minister for Resources and Rural Affairs and one with the Shadow Minister for Agriculture. These were prompted by the co-op's concerns about the transposition of the EU's Nitrates Directive into Maltese law and its actual implementation. Both the Minister and the Shadow Minister accepted an invitation to discuss the issue. In preparatory meetings the employees helped the committee to decide *what* issues needed to be raised but also *how* these were to be discussed. In terms of learning, the *how* was as important as the *what*. The committee decided that when discussing a particular issue from the list, participants were free to intervene when they felt the need to do so. However, they had to adhere to the issue

being discussed without verging on other unrelated arguments, in order to keep the discussion focused. As one of the employees said,

> Everyone could speak, there was no problem about that, because we were, in a sense, organised in our way of proceeding, so that we would not fall into the trap of the ministry by letting everybody speak at the same time.

Judging from what both the employees and the committee members said, this must have been a learning opportunity also for the Minister and civil servants that accompanied him. An employee said that towards the end of the meeting the Minister remarked, "You were very much organised here," implying that he was not expecting a farmers' committee to be organised in such an effective way. Similarly the other employee said that the Shadow Minister was impressed by the fact that the farmers were very much informed about policies and laws, again implying the general perception that farmers are usually not very conversant with policy discourse, at national, let alone at EU level.

Rose commented on farmers' behaviour in different social settings. She spoke almost angrily about the fact that many times Mġarr farmers fail to win the respect of others when they move beyond the boundaries of MFCS and Mġarr, not because they are ignorant but because they don't know how to play the game. She believed that farmers are able to acquire the cultural tools usually associated with the middle classes without compromising their identity. In her words,

> The fact that they ask me, "What should I wear?" rather than come [for a formal meeting] wearing something [inappropriate]... We've just come from a fair [in Italy] and there were a lot of people from Mġarr with us. Some of them... you're not going to the field, you're going to the fair. Going there as a representative [of the co-op] is one thing, going there for fun is another thing. There's a way and a way. Even if we go somewhere... for example last year I took sixteen farmers to Sicily. We only stayed there for three days but we saw lots of things. We really enjoyed ourselves. But I used to advise them beforehand, to use manners. I don't tolerate ignorance. You need to be aware of where you are. If we're in the fields we speak in a certain way; if we're at the store, and there are strangers present, people whom you don't know [...] that's another thing. But then I'm not in any way embarrassed if I'm with the farmers and the Minister is present; and when I speak with the farmers I speak in dialect. If I'm with them I'm like them. I'm not going to be ashamed of myself. A farmer has as much dignity as the minister. [...] Some people think that they're not intelligent. But I think they're very intelligent and they know a lot of things, but they lack certain manners in

the way they act. As for the rest, it's not because of their ignorance that they're still working the fields.

She was aware of the pedagogic role she played in informally influencing the way the members of the co-op think and act.

6.7   Learning *for* the co-op: making the case for co-operation as an alternative way ahead

6.7.1   Turbulent times: the challenges farmers are facing in the aftermath of EU accession

All the interviewed farmers spoke passionately about the challenges they were facing. A first challenge was the increase in operational costs. Farmers spoke about the huge amounts of capital one had to put into the farm to be able to compete. Profits are very meagre and so they are resorting to intensive cultivation. This entails the aggressive use of underground water and is resulting in an unsustainable depletion of the aquifer. At the same time they are afraid that at one point the government will put a price on underground water extraction. They all agree that when this happens, the operational costs will reach unsustainable limits and they will have to wrap up.

Profit margins are also following an unrelenting downward trend. An interviewee explained how in the past a farmer would have survived on a small farm. Nowadays he needs more land, and will have to resort to intensive cultivation, or to use his expression, "harvest and sow, harvest and sow". This has led to a higher production and a consequential dip in prices. To make matters worse, the farmers claimed that the private middlemen at the Ta' Qali central vegetable market play all sorts of tricks on them, robbing them at every possible occasion. Consequently, after investing huge sums of money, the farmer ends up getting a modest wage's worth, making farmers ask whether it would make more sense to get a job where personal risk would be much less and a modest wage more secure.

New regulations were also proving to be a challenge. Since Malta's accession to the EU in 2004, Malta's agriculture had to be regulated along EU laws. Prominent among the new regulations is the transposition of the 1991 EU Nitrates Directive (European Council Directive 1991/676/EEC and European Council and European Parliament Directive 2000/60/EC) into Maltese law. The local authorities are

preventing Maltese farmers from using any fertilizers containing nitrates in the period running from October to March. This is the most productive season on the island and interviewees argued that the local authorities are transposing practices from the continent where climate conditions are very different and where the growing season starts much later. Concurrently, farmers are being made to keep records of pesticides and fertilizers that are stocked and used by them in their farms. Farmers have never been used to keeping written records and they all spoke about this as an added burden to their very long day in the fields. Interviewees also spoke very negatively about the Malta Environment and Planning Authority (MEPA), whose bureaucracy makes it next to impossible to get planning permissions for water reservoirs, mostly for aesthetic reasons, even though rain water harvesting fits hand in glove with the government's water conservation policy.

Large scale importation of plants is leading to the introduction of foreign pests and diseases to the island. These are difficult to control and sometimes no pest control exists. Natural elements also leave their toll on farms, with sudden storms in winter and very high, scorching temperatures in summer. Mġarr farmers are especially exposed to strong North West winds during winter which sometimes destroys greenhouses. One farmer spoke about the devastation, saying,

> do you remember the last time there was a strong wind? It devastated our greenhouses, broke and bent the metal frames. It makes you feel depressed. At that moment you feel really depressed.

But the greatest watershed in recent times for the Maltese farmer has been the removal of protective tariffs. Since Malta joined the European common market, Maltese farmers have found themselves competing mostly with Sicilian farmers on their own turf. Interviewees singled out the excellent daily catamaran service that links Malta to Pozzallo in Sicily. Farmers explained how prior to 2004, during times of abundance the prices would go down. But then in times of scarcity prices would go up and farmers were able to make up for the losses incurred at the height of production. This mechanism does not hold any more. In times of abundance prices are low. When local production starts to waver, Maltese importers cross over to Sicily and bring cheap produce from there. In this way, prices never go up in the local market, which means that the farmer's income is always under pressure. Farmers are afraid that things are set to become worse because the EU is dealing with North African countries to open its markets to their agricultural produce as well.

Interviewees also wondered whether there was a life beyond the fields, with their long working days running from dawn to dusk all year round. Farming is also a tiring work, notwithstanding the investments in machinery and equipment. Mondays and Thursdays are market days. Farmers used to take their produce to the market until one in the afternoon. Recently they were made to bring in their produce by nine in the morning, hoping to have Maltese produce available at greengrocers before Sicilian produce reaches the shops. But this has meant that farmers have to start harvesting from the day before in order to make it to the market by nine of the following morning. Consequently, given that Monday is a market day, farmers have to work also on Sundays. The change was piloted by government with the help of FCCS but was received with great opposition from many of the farmers sitting on the committee of MFCS.

Interviewees argued that because of these daunting challenges very few young people are taking up agriculture. Two farmers spoke proudly of their sons becoming full-time farmers. But another farmer said he would not encourage his sons to become farmers. One even said that if he had a son he would tell him, "I don't want you to become a farmer. I'd send him away." A farmer also hinted at the fact that farming still carries the stigma of being the occupation of the school failures, arguing that "nowadays everybody is trying to do well at school."

6.7.2 Reading the word and world: extrapolating from the knowledge learned at Mġarr in order to make the case for co-operation

What emerges from the interviews testifies to the fact that the co-op committee and the employees are doing their best to voice the farmers' concerns about the transposition of the *acquis communautaire*. As argued in 4.10 above, the latter is a neo-liberal manifesto couched in a dominant discourse that contributes to the building of consensus in political circles across the EU over a commitment towards creating more wealth without necessarily ensuring that that wealth is equitably distributed and that it is meant to enable all people to reach their fulfilment. EU dominant discourse tends to put human development squarely within the paradigm of human capital at the service of the economy, promoting an ideology of competition, rather than co-operation, across boarders within the EU enclave.

The Mġarr co-op was set up as part of a British post-war colonial policy that, as argued by Birchall (1997, see 4.3 above) was aimed at maintaining the global economic

and political relations between colonisers and colonised. The setting up of co-operatives in local communities was meant to connect them to global economic, financial and trade structures over which the communities did not have and were never expected to have any control (Birchall, 1997, p.133). The introduction of the co-operative model in rural Malta in the immediate post-war period was never meant to empower local communities to question British colonialism or the dominant discourse of British hegemony. As Freire would argue, it would have been 'a contradiction in terms' (Freire, 1990, p.30). It was only meant to be a way of increasing "agricultural efficiency and productivity", without any real commitment towards the ideology of co-operation (Baldacchino, 1994, p.509). Or as Braden and Mayo put it when arguing about community-development programmes initiated by colonial authorities, it was a means of 'educating' local communities to adapt themselves to mainstream culture, to almost domesticate themselves out of their backwardness, while at the same time "persuading the less powerful to accept the legitimacy of existing social relationships" (Braden and Mayo, 1999, p.192-193)

Notwithstanding this, along the years the Mġarr farmers acquired and created knowledge that can make the case for the validity of co-operation in Mġarr and elsewhere. I could evaluate the way the Mġarr co-op was dealing with the challenges that emanated mainly from Malta's accession to the European Union in 2004. By then the participants in the co-op had learned how to read the word, that is, they had learned how to manage a community-based co-operative, to know what they knew, to know what they did not, and to hire people with the right skills and commitment to bridge the knowledge gaps. They learned how to put their different abilities together in order to wean themselves off the external support from FCCS. They took control over the democratic administrative setup of the co-op as well as over their customer-owned store, turning it into a successful business venture.

Crowther (2013) argues that 'Social movements inject critique, vision and imagination into what we have learnt to take for granted' (Crowther, 2013, p.36). One cannot really say that the Mġarr co-op is a fully fledged social movement, but it is surely a community-based organisation that shares a lot with wider social movements. Appropriating the co-op model that was handed over to them by the colonial authorities, they could move from 'reading the word' to 'reading the world', moving beyond anything that the colonial authorities had in mind in the mid-1940s. By 'reading the word' I mean that the Mġarr co-op leaders and employees had mastered

the technical knowledge needed to take control over the administrative running of the co-op as a democratic community-based grassroots organisation as well as the knowledge to run a collectively-owned retail business. This was empowering enough to lead them to explore the possibilities of 'reading the world', that is, using the accumulated sense of empowerment to engage with those political forces that had a bearing on the farmer members' farm operations and question them. For example, they felt empowered to argue that one cannot implement European rules to the letter without making allowance for regional particularities.

Calling those political forces to task was perhaps the salient sign that the Mġarr farmers were learning the real value of co-operation. They felt empowered enough to feel that they could summon the Minister to their headquarters to take up the most pressing issues concerning Maltese farmers and discuss their own alternative agenda because they had earned credibility as a successful co-operative on multiple accounts. They felt empowered that as a co-op they had managed to put together a team that could gauge the structures of feeling among the farming community of Mġarr, acknowledge them, give them shape and structure, and wield them against the person who at the time was the harbinger of political power, sitting at the crossroads between Valletta and Brussels. They felt empowered because within the dialogical spaces inside the co-op they had developed an alternative discourse to the dominant one developed in Brussels and relayed by the Valletta authorities and thought that their alternative discourse could withstand a dialogical encounter with political power.

They felt empowered also because within the co-op structures they had learned how to conduct a proper dialogical encounter, they had learned the rules of the game, for example by preparing the arguments beforehand, by agreeing on who should take the lead, by agreeing to focus on the chosen arguments in a sequential and orderly manner, by making an effort not to digress but keep to the argument. This feeling of empowerment was felt also at the co-op's own grassroots level. A young farmer member of MFCS who does not sit on the committee, said

> If you have certain problems, you can voice them in a place near you. For example you have the committee, and you tell them, listen [I have this problem] and then they [take action]. For example, if you have a problem about something, I don't know, and you want to bring that problem to certain departments or something similar, you lodge your complaint with them [the co-op committee], you speak to them, and they're in a better position to put [the

> complaint] forward. [...] And the committee is made up of farmers. And farmers always want the good of the farmer.

It was quite clear that the Mġarr farmers had learned that co-operation could be useful for advocacy, for being an empowered voice for local or sectorial communities.

In the research process the Mġarr co-op emerged as a participative structure, democratic in nature in that it was managed by a group of unassuming farmers and a number of employees who were set upon building a relationship of trust between them in order to make the co-op work for its membership base. It emerged as a space and place where the growth of the collective depended upon the growth of individuals. There was a sense of awareness of the fact that the co-op as an organisation could only grow, develop, learn and be effective on various levels in the measure that it managed to open up participative spaces and to make the best use of the abilities of individual members, facilitating their coming together to meet, discuss and act over shared issues. In the dialogical processes within the co-op as well as with political authorities such as the Minister for Rural Affairs and the Shadow Minister for Agriculture, the co-op could be an effective voice that expressed a sound and credible alternative voice that reflected the structures of feeling among its grassroots in contrast to the dominant voice of higher political power. They had managed to summon the authorities to their Mġarr office to discuss the farmers' own agenda. It had been able to open up spaces for farmers with their wealth of agricultural knowledge and family history of participation in, and commitment towards, co-op life. It had also opened spaces for employees who, while coming from farming families, had also managed to get a good command over the dominant language and discourse of power. The co-op had created the right space at the place closest to the grassroots where this effective chemistry for participative community action could take place. And the individuals interviewed were aware and proud to have created it and to have been part of it. They felt they were growing in as much as they contributed for all this to happen.

The Mġarr farmers were also aware of the potential of the co-operative organisational model to seek consensus beyond the local community over issues of wider concern. They knew that if farmers' organisations got together they too could set an agenda controlled by the farmers themselves and enter into dialogical encounters with the authorities with an alternative discourse that could challenge the dominant one, and enter that dialogical process from a position of strength rather than

fragmentation. However, more than one interviewee argued that this has not yet materialised. A farmer argued how the co-op's representative on the FCCS central committee had made an attempt to bring together a wider coalition of farmers' co-operatives and associations but was ousted from his position of authority by the other representatives sitting on the FCCS committee for daring to do so. He also gave the example of when a hail storm had damaged many crops and the same representative proposed to the other delegates on the FCCS committee to send a formal request for financial compensation to government to make up for the losses incurred. The interviewee said that since the storm had not had the same devastating effects in other parts of the island, the other delegates did not back the proposal and the Mġarr co-op had to go it alone on the issue.

Over time, the co-op leaders and employees had also learned that the co-op structure is a good way of making the best use of local talent, male and female, turning it to the benefit of community-based, grassroots-led, development processes. An all-male management committee struggled to make space for Rose, a female administrator who yearned to put her abilities into practice and to learn from her job. A female interviewee spoke about how at first there were men who were throwing out Rose's suggestions for business process improvement for debatable reasons. Rose argued that she had to earn the trust and confidence of the all-male committee and suggested that this was not an automatic process to be taken for granted. However, once she started proving herself, she could enable the committee to wean off the co-op from any external interference in administrative and financial matters. The all-male committee is now in a position to acknowledge Rose as a de facto manager of the co-op and also acknowledge her important contribution to the co-op's success in financial, organisational and advocacy issues. They still have to show, however, that co-ops can be a community organisation tool where women can occupy posts in the place where the strings are pulled. Since its setting up in 1947 no female has ever sat on the co-op's management committee. This is not simply a question of voting for a female member during the annual general meeting. More radically, it is about recognising the crucial role that women play in agriculture, as testified by the male, full-time farmer interviewees, as well as women's role in community organisation and activism, as testified by Rose who spoke about how things she learned at the co-op and during her volunteering in community activities organised by the parish or the Local Council fed into each other.

Finally, it also emerged very clearly that managing the family farm has remained a private business affair; over sixty years of co-operation in Mġarr has changed very little of that. This is directly linked to the argument about Sicilian imports. The EU favours a liberalised market where producers compete with each other at an EU-wide level on the principle of the free movement of goods. The discourse developing on the ground at Mġarr is that protecting the local agricultural industry goes beyond the need to ensure competition at EU level through free movement across borders because this only amounts to survival of the fittest. On the one hand the Maltese government is still upholding the EU maxim. On the other hand the farmers themselves are not yet ready to drop some of their control over their farms in order to test out co-operation at production level that might provide a credible alternative to the dominant capitalist one promoted by the EU. In the Mġarr context, co-operation has shown to be effective for participative community action, for collective and individual learning, for being able to create knowledge in the process of reading the word and the world, for opening up spaces for women, for at least attempting going beyond the frontiers of the co-op and of the rural village in order to create consensus over alternative discourses on agriculture. The Mġarr farmers made co-operation work for advocacy, and for consumer-controlled retail outlets that are driven more by the aim of seeing to the members' needs than by mere profit. But they had failed to use co-operation to create an alternative paradigm to the competitive one proposed by the EU under the pretence of the principle of free movement of goods. They used their co-operative structure to question the European paradigm but failed to offer an alternative from fear that this might impinge upon their independence. At the practical level they failed to explore how co-operation at production level could enable the individual agricultural producers to achieve better results in terms of quality and quantity of production, profit margins, and most of all, a better quality of life. The result is that they failed to tackle the issue at ideological level and test out co-operation as a possibility of producing an alternative paradigm of production, retail and marketing in contrast with the dominant paradigm championed by the EU and upheld by the Maltese government.

At MFCS, committee and employees were aware of the structural framework that circumscribed their room for manoeuvre and they dared to imagine a different future for the co-op. The success gained in managing a successful co-op store was fostering a sense of agency that was in a permanent formative stage, or to paraphrase

Freire (2001, p.66), in a continuous state of unfinishedness, of becoming. It was a co-op grappling with growth.

6.8   Conclusion

In this chapter I have outlined the characteristics of MFCS in terms of its historical development as well as its main functions. I outlined four reasons why the people of Mġarr, after more than sixty years, still feel that the co-op is relevant. First it was useful for the local farmers because by belonging to the co-op they could sell their produce at the Farmers' Central Co-operative Society (FCCS) shed at the central vegetable market. Secondly the co-op offered a well-stocked, one-stop, agriculture supplies shop for its members. Capable salespersons recruited from the locality have enabled the co-operative to provide the local farmers with goods and services from the store as well as to obtain control over its accounts management, securing profits that go partly into the members' pockets as shareholders and partly into the further development of the co-op's services. Thirdly, the co-op organised non-formal training opportunities for members, in Mġarr and abroad. The fourth function was advocacy, developing the ability to be a voice for local farmers in their engagement with authorities developing an alternative discourse in the process.

Next I discussed cross-cutting issues related to age, gender and level of education. Less young people were taking agriculture as a full-time occupation, mainly because agriculture was still considered as an occupation for school failures. I highlighted the contradictory developments regarding female participation in the co-op where a historically exclusively male management committee is learning how to share power with a female administrator who has been a lynchpin in the co-op's turnaround in terms of financial stability and administrative control. This was inter-linked to the fact that all the male farmers on the management committee had a limited command over the technical discourse of management. Consequently they found that they had to rely on the formal knowledge which the employees brought to the co-op and which enabled the institution to wean itself off from FCCS and gain greater control over its own affairs. I concluded that the strength of the co-op lay in its ability to build a trusting relationship between the elected all-male committee and the male and female employees, forging the practical agricultural knowledge of the farmers and the administrative, financial and managerial knowledge of the employees. At the political

level, this fusion developed into a discourse that enabled the co-op to engage effectively with the authorities.

I then argued that the co-op was a learning experience where participants learned from going about performing their roles in the co-op and particularly by co-operating with others in a collective organisation. They learned to listen, to trust, to be open to other people's ideas and ways of looking at things. They learned how to speak in an informed and effective way, in a manner in which the word becomes a political weapon, a voice for farmers in the face of dominant political power. The employees learned how to run a successful store, giving a good customer service, handling correspondence with external entities, and helping out in committee meetings, enabling the committee to fulfil its different roles.

I then analysed how the co-op provided non-formal and informal learning experiences to members and customers, mainly by banking upon the expertise of its own employees who acted as consultants to the committee with regards to technical knowledge but also with regards to processes related to administration and to advocacy. The employees also facilitated non-formal and informal training opportunities for members of the co-op, integrating it with their role as interlocutors with the authorities and with the shop suppliers.

Finally I argued that the participants from Mġarr had also learned to make the case for co-operation as an effective tool that enabled them to engage with the challenges they were facing at the moment. They appropriated the co-op model that was handed over to them in order give a visible expression to the structures of feeling developing among the co-op's membership base. The management and employees had found in co-operation an effective political tool with which to engage with the authorities, developing an alternative to the antithetical dominant discourse based not on co-operation but on competition. The Mġarr farmers were aware of the potential of co-operation to bring about a wider consensus over issues concerning Maltese farmers, a consensus that, however, had still not been achieved. I argued that the Mġarr co-op had showed how the co-operative model could be a model for bringing together the abilities of the people in the community and weave those abilities into a structure that could have the agency to bring about changes that would give the local people more control over their lives. Finally I argued that notwithstanding all this, co-operation had not brought any significant change to the individualism that characterised the running

of family farms in the community, playing into the very same dominant discourse promoted by the EU, of competition across borders.

In the next chapter I will explore a different co-operative that, though departing from a different starting point, was engaging with very similar challenges albeit in different ways, providing an alternative way forward in the same economic and political scenario.

Chapter 7

The second case study: *Koperattiva Rurali Manikata* (KRM) Ltd

7.1   Introduction

In this chapter I will look at the second case study, *Koperattiva Rurali Manikata*. I will delve into the circumstances that led to the setting up of a farmers' and residents' committee in the hamlet and how this eventually led to the founding of a co-operative. I will give an overview of the four main functions of the co-operative at the time of the research. Then I will speak about the ten interviewees who participated in the research, focusing on their diversity of age, gender, educational background and full-time jobs; I will look into the strength that this diversity brings to the co-op but also the challenges it creates. Next, I will go into the learning that goes on in the co-operative, discussing the ways interviewees learned while taking up responsibilities, working or volunteering in the different activities and projects of the co-op. Finally I will analyse how the participants had managed to make the case for co-operation, and how they have made co-operation work in their favour and where they had failed.

7.2   *Koperattiva Rurali Manikata* (KRM) Ltd

Four kilometres down the road from Mġarr, perched above two sandy beaches, lies the agricultural district of Għajn Tuffieħa. Punic tombs, a Roman bath complex, medieval cave dwellings, farmhouses built by the Order of St John, an extensive Royal Marines Training Centre and a five star hotel over the beach attest to the variegated history of the place. In the inter-war period government put up for sale some plots of land on the top of the hill overlooking the sandy beaches and the fields. Here the hamlet of Manikata took shape. It is now home to about five hundred inhabitants, mostly full-time or part-time farmers, running family farms in the surrounding valleys. In the last two

decades many outsiders settled there. The village revolves around a small church built in 1919-1920 and another contemporary church further up the road, an architectural landmark on the island (see also Cardona, 2002, p.155-167). There is one grocery store and a small restaurant. Manikata is home to one of the primary co-operatives within the FCCS network, the St Paul's Bay Farmers' Co-operative Society. The only active organisation in the village is the parish of St Joseph that organises community activities such as the annual village *festa* every last Sunday of August (see also Cardona 2006, p.1-12). It is a very quiet place and forms part of the municipality of Mellieħa, a small town further north. No inhabitant of the hamlet has ever stood for elections ever since Local Councils were set up in 1993.

Manikata was taken by storm in June 2005 when tenant farmers on government land received notifications that their land-lease was being terminated; the land was needed for a golf course in a bid to attract up-market tourists. Simultaneously other tenancies on the other side of the village were being terminated to make way for a by-pass as part of the European TEN-T road network. *Alternattiva Demokratika*, Malta's green party, organised an awareness raising protest march in Manikata on 17 July. At the end of the activity two part-time farmers asked me to chair a community meeting they were calling at the parish hall the following Sunday. It was the beginning of a two year campaign spearheaded by a number of farmers, called *Kumitat għall-Ħarsien Rurali ta' Għajn Tuffieħa* (Committee for the Safeguard of Rural Life at Għajn Tuffieħa). The Committee organised press conferences on the sites where both golf course and by-pass were to be built, sent letters to local newspapers, and met with members of the Mellieħa Local Council, members from both sides of the National Parliament, and members of the European Parliament. It also built a strategic alliance with environment groups. The result was that government shelved both projects and instead set up a Majjistral (Northwest) Nature and History Park on the land sandwiched between the village and the seashore. As argued in Cardona 2010 (p.253-257), it was an empowering experience that led farmers to pass from a defensive to an active stance. Stopping government from carrying out its plans, they used the skills learned during the campaign to propose and implement their own projects. After presenting a business plan to the Co-operatives' Board, the Committee obtained co-operative status in August 2007 and became *Koperattiva Rurali Manikata* (KRM) Ltd. At the time of the research KRM had 29 members, 16 men and 13 women, full-time and part-time farmers and residents from the Għajn Tuffieħa district. It employed five part-time employees, four of

whom were members of the co-op. Its income derived from the Manikata Rural Heritage Trail, a fruit and vegetable Sunday store and various community activities.

7.3   What do we get if we belong? Four different aims for setting up a new co-operative.

The golf course saga was a traumatic experience for many tenant farmers of the district, as the wife of a part-time farmer said,

> you feel like you had worked to have vineyards, hoping to recover all the expenses over ten years, and then, out of the blues, they take them away from you [...] It was thanks to the co-op they didn't. [...] But otherwise they would have taken away our fields because they were going to build like small houses, you know. It's not fair that the rich keep getting richer, and then he who is almost poor they take away from him everything he has. It's not fair.

A full-time farmer recalled the nightmare,

> two years [...] problems, all the time waking up and dreaming about it, always on your mind. It was a hard blow. Because we had the house, and about eighteen *tomna*[3] of land; all the fields around here were going to be destroyed. And the house was important. You may say they would have given us another house, but we're used to living here. It was so bad. It was really bad. But we came together, and with a little help from here and little help from there, and with the help of the many contacts you had with so many people, we won it. We thank God we won it. And that was the first step we did together.

On the positive side the campaign led to the setting up of the co-operative in order to preserve the bond that was established between all those involved in the campaign since that same bond offered some kind of reassurance. An interviewee argued that even though his fields were not going to be affected by the government projects, he was active on the Committee and later helped to set up the co-op, "So that in the same way I stood up for others, we get together so that then they will stand up for me should they come to take my fields." Another farmer argued that "if you work together with others in a group you feel safer in your work" and described the co-operative as the farmers' "agricultural union". Similarly, another interviewee said that

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[3] The Maltese inherited a measurement system from the medieval Sicilian administrators. The basic land measurement unit, still used to this day by farmers, is the *tomna* (Maltese) or *tumolo* (Sicilian). One *tomna* or *tumolo* is equivalent to 12,100 square feet. (See Fiorini, 1992, p.lvi).

he had worked to set up the co-op "so that if they revive the golf course idea there will be the co-operative to stand up for farmer's rights."

A second raison d'être of the co-operative is the promotion of bottom-up local development. The crux of the problem with both the golf course and the Manikata by-pass was that these projects were proposed in total disregard for the social, economic and cultural dimensions of local ways of life. When government decided to shelve both projects, the Committee decided to harness the skills learned throughout the two-year campaign in order to propose projects that would highlight the best the local community and its territory could offer.

One way of doing this was to manage the area called *Il-Bajjad*, an area just outside Manikata consisting of vineyards, orchards and market gardens. Parts of *Il-Bajjad* were not cultivated because the soil was shallow and there was little irrigation water available. At the far end of *Il-Bajjad* lay the *Razzett tal-Qasam*, a farmstead built by the Knights of Malta. It was an abandoned and vandalised government property that up to around 1980 was leased to tenants for habitation and for the rearing of animals. Further down lay the former house of the Commanding Officer of the Għajn Tuffieħa Royal Marines Training Centre. This is now tenanted to a farming family with agricultural stores and a small animal farm. At *Il-Bajjad* there are also Roman and Punic tombs, a 1935 military beach post, and many indigenous trees especially carob, pine and olive. It is also home to rabbits, hedgehogs and chameleons. In the golf course project this area was earmarked for small villas, while the *Razzett tal-Qasam* farmstead was set to become a club house.

KRM proposed the setting up of the Manikata Rural Heritage Trail, connecting the Commanding Officer's house, the farmstead, and the fields spread over *Il-Bajjad*. It obtained a management agreement over the *Razzett tal-Qasam* farmstead from government, binding itself to rehabilitate it and open it to visitors. Through the Olive Green Project the co-op distributed seven hundred sponsored olive trees to its members to be planted at *Il-Bajjad*, turning all the uncultivated areas into olive groves. Two enterprising farmers brought irrigation water to the area so that the olive trees could be watered during the long dry summer period. As one interviewee put it, now that all fields at *Il-Bajjad* were cultivated, nobody could say that these fields were abandoned and use this as an excuse to come up with some new devastating project.

The beach post was cleaned and made accessible. A Roman tomb and an adjoining apiary were cleaned and new clay pots put in place. A number of local indigenous trees were pruned and a scrap yard in one of the fields cleared to make way for a picnic area. Rubble walls were repaired and passage ways opened. An interviewee remarked how the setting up of the Manikata Rural Heritage Trail could not be possible without the coming together of the *Il-Bajjad* farmers who reappraised the agricultural, archaeological and historical artefacts in the area.

A second way of promoting endogenous development was to organise community activities. Chief among these is the annual Pumpkin Feast held every last Sunday of October where locals and outsiders appreciate local farmers' produce as well as local cuisine. A very active farmer sitting on the committee explained how

> I felt we had to keep going and do something so that at least in this place of Manikata we would have something. Because before that, [...] there was nothing except for the parish feast. Since we set up the co-op we created the Pumpkin Feast, and we're going on with the project [Trail] and we did a lot of things since then.

The Pumpkin Feast helped to raise the profile of the hamlet, putting it at par with larger villages that have their own festivals. As a part-time farmer argued, the Pumpkin Feast passes on the message that "we are here too, you know. As a community we're here." On the other hand it enabled the locals to believe more in themselves. The same interviewee was of the opinion that "there were people here in Manikata who never dreamed about these things, you know. It is a positive factor, and it's important for us as a community." Another female interviewee noted how in a hamlet where community activities are sparse, the Pumpkin Feast and the preparations that lead to it fulfil an important social function since they enable the locals "to meet each other. And you won't be alone, on your own, all the time."

A third raison d'être of the co-op is the direct retailing of fruits and vegetables to customers from its Sunday store. The co-op secured the lease of the Armoury of the former Għajn Tuffieħa Royal Marines Training Centre and was slowly turning it into its headquarters. Charles, a full-time farmer sitting on the committee, contacts farmers from the Għajn Tuffieħa district and purchases vegetables and fruits to be sold from the co-op's Sunday store. Members of the co-op also produce typical local products such as jams, wine, olive oil and pickles. These are packed under the co-op's label and sold at

the store. The store is seen as a way how local farmers can fight back the negative effects of Sicilian competition and the resulting low prices farmers get at the central vegetable market. As one interviewee said,

> Even the European Union, the big countries, are seeing that the farmer cannot cope in the way he's doing. I mean that the same problem we have here is present also in other countries. We should not think that we're alone. And today they're realising, the farmers' associations and co-operatives, that if nothing is going to be done to facilitate the direct retailing by the farmer, the farmer will collapse.

The co-op was trying to fight off foreign competition by establishing a positive relationship with its client base, focusing on quality as a marketing strategy. Grace, wife of the voluntary store manager said "You know how my husband is; he would want to buy the best possible and all the people tell him: what fine vegetables you have, and similar things." Her husband Charles explained that the store was establishing a relationship of trust with its client base. However, he regretted that these clients came mostly from outside of Manikata, arguing that

> Those who buy from the shop, from us, are buying a fresh product and they know what they're buying. [...] But then there are those who don't care; you find those for whom it's like we don't exist. But don't bother about that, maybe in the future they would start realising and start understanding what we're doing. Since nothing ever happened around here, [...] maybe people will find it more difficult to get involved. But I have great hope that in the future people will appreciate more.

A fourth function of KRM is the organisation of training initiatives. Since its setting up in 2007 the co-op has organised a number of different courses, responding to the needs of the co-operative and its members. It organised two courses leading to the food-handling licence which was needed to enable volunteers and employees to serve food to visitors on the Manikata Rural Heritage Trail as well as during community activities. It was also needed by members of the co-op who produced jams and pickles to be sold to the co-op's clients. When the co-op decided to turn abandoned fields at *Il-Bajjad* into olive groves, it organised a course about the cultivation of olive trees, alongside the roll-out of the Olive Green Project. When the co-op became aware of the potential of local food products, it sought the help of the Institute of Tourism Studies to organise a course for members on how to make fruit jams and vegetable pickles. When some members of the co-op noticed that new pests were decimating their stone-fruit trees, the co-op organised a course on the care of these trees. Another course held at

the members' request was a first aid course. Courses were also open to the local community; participants paid only a nominal fee since courses were financed through a training scheme managed by the Central Co-operatives Fund.

7.4   The interviewees - age, gender and education: working within and outside stereotypes

The ten Manikata interviewees were all members of the co-op. Five were members of the committee; four of these were part-time employees. Six were males and four females. The females included the co-op manager and the co-op secretary. The other two females were very active members, always at the forefront of activities and initiatives. Women were always present on the committee, ranging from one to three persons. A male interviewee thought this was good since,

> With at least one woman on the committee we don't go on with the same old tradition, so to speak, with all-male committees. [...] If she has experience she would be able to speak and to manage things as much as a man.

The presence of females on the committee was taken for granted and they always occupied key roles. As the secretary said,

> I consider Magdalene to be one of the foundations, the fulcrum of the co-op, who is giving her hundred percent for the co-op [...]. I think that the co-op does not make a difference between women and men. [...] As a co-op I think we're open for everybody. For example, even now, recently, we used to have a male architect but now perhaps we need to change him and we found a female who we think is good and we don't think twice to engage her. Even with regards to employees we're balanced, there are both women and men. I think we're equal.

Five of the male interviewees were members of the former Committee for the Safeguard of Rural Life in Għajn Tuffieħa and founder members of the co-operative. One of them is the oldest member of the co-op, in his late seventies but still very active on the family farm.

The co-op does not generate enough income to be able to employ full-time employees. Interviewees had full-time jobs elsewhere except for the manager who is employed on a part-time basis but the co-op is her only source of income.   The others include three full-time farmers, two males and a female, three male part-time farmers who have a full-time job related to agriculture and environmental management, one female social worker, a food factory manager, and a female home-maker. In

Magdalene's words, what counts is not whether one is a female or a male but the ability of the committee to know what are the strengths of every member so that each one can contribute towards the aims of the co-operative. Having experience in different full-time jobs members brought different skills to the co-op. On the other hand, they were all conversant with agriculture since all hailed from farm-owning families.

The age of the interviewees varied from early twenties to late seventies. Six were in their fifties, reflecting the fact that in 2005, when the golf course and the by-pass issues came up, they were in their mid-forties, managing successful agricultural ventures that were going to be wiped out by the two projects. They had every interest to involve themselves with the Committee and to set up the co-operative that replaced it. The three persons in their twenties, thirties and forties all held key positions on the committee.

Figure 10. The ten Manikata interviewees

Age	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70-79
No. of interviewees	1	1	1	6	0	1

The ten interviewees had very mixed school experiences in terms of attitudes and attainment. One interviewee attended only up till the end of the primary school at the age of twelve. Two interviewees did two years of secondary school, leaving school at fourteen, which was compulsory school age at the time. Another interviewee did only one year of secondary and left at thirteen. Another interviewee did four years of secondary school in two different church schools. Two interviewees completed their secondary school and went on to higher technical education; one left the course mid-way while the other stayed on and did an apprenticeship programme which led directly to a job with a government department. Another one completed his secondary education and after another year of private study, joined a diploma course in middle management. Another interviewee completed her A Levels and then joined a local bank while a last interviewee had completed a university course by the time of the interview.

It is striking that four interviewees had attended Church schools. The oldest interviewee was a student in two different Church secondary schools in the immediate post-war period. It must have been a feat for those days for a student from a farming family from such a secluded place as Manikata to attend a fee-paying Church school.

Another one said that her parents had chosen to send her and her siblings to Church schools because they believed that,

> apart from values, we would have discipline; and to make sure we got the best education. As for the rest, their aspirations were that we learn and do well at school. They know what hard work in the fields means and so they wished that we do not suffer like them.

A fourth interviewee hinted that fee-paying Church schools were not within everybody's reach but her parents "sacrificed themselves because they thought that if they sent us to a Church school we would have a better education."

Parents' attitudes or family situations and needs were the determining factors that led interviewees to stay on or to leave school early. One of those who went to a Church school said that he had to leave school at fifteen because he had to take care of his sick mother while his father was working in America. The other three finished their compulsory schooling and went on to higher education, one of them even getting a university degree. On the other hand those who left school between the age of twelve and fourteen all went to a state school and had to leave because of particular family situations. One said that after one year of secondary school her parents pulled her out because

> mother needed me; she had just had my younger brother and she was in hospital and she couldn't take care of him and I had to leave school. She pulled me out of school when I was like twelve and a half years.

Another two said that their father had always made it a point to send them to school and that they did their homework. However, both had to leave at fourteen because they were needed on the family farm. One of them said that

> I left school mostly because of my father, because he ended up on his own on the farm. Because in one year four children had left him, two emigrated and two got married, and then he told me, "Leave so that you can help me work the fields." The teachers didn't want me to leave; even the mayor's brother told me, "come and continue your education at Naxxar." But I told him, "I can't."

Six interviewees said that school was a positive personal experience. One said that she was really let down when she was forced to leave school at fourteen because she participated in school activities and was good at school. Another interviewee said that he enjoyed meeting friends at school while another interviewee said that she preferred going to university than working on the farm because

Being farmers, they speak to other farmers. They go to the market and maybe meet other farmers over there, but for the rest of the day you're on your own, there, in the fields. [...] I don't feel comfortable that way. I prefer to meet more people and socialize.

School in these farming families is not seen only as a pathway to a better job in terms of physical hardship but also a pathway out of solitary work and isolation.

Four interviewees said they also had negative experiences at school. One said that she sometimes felt out of place in the Church school she attended because most of the other school mates came from families belonging to the traditional professional elite. Another interviewee said that school was a very negative experience because he had to live in the shadow of his older brother who always did better than him at school. This had a very profound effect on his self-esteem, a scar he still carried with him. Another interviewee spoke of a very negative experience at the primary school that had all the symptoms of Milani's hospital that cured the healthy and kicked out the sick (Milani, 1996, p. 20). He asserted that

if you were not good at school, rather than helping you to bring you on track they would almost ridicule you and you would get a smack or two with the pointer whenever you got a wrong answer in maths. I don't have such a nice experience of school. [...] I had my first experience at what we used to call 'the sisters' school'; today we call it kindergarten. So right from the start, even bullying, there was a lot of bullying. But the worst thing was the teachers. They were too cruel, that's how I saw them. [...] At the primary school they came to work almost as if they were forced to. They were annoyed by being in class with you. They didn't have the approach of trying to help the student; nothing of the sort. If you didn't understand them at the first instant, you were stupid, a good-for-nothing.

He was quick to remark that when he started attending a technical school life was very different because there were teachers

that tried to help you; that tried to lead you wherever you wanted to get to. [...] And they were like working men themselves and so they did not think like a teacher. They were scholarly all the same, but...

Another interviewee who after going to a Church secondary school went on to do a course in middle management, noted that over and above everything, the greatest learning experience for him was the workplace, shouldering responsibility and facing day-to-day practical problems. He did not like school very much but when a higher

education institute offered him a more practical way of learning things, school suddenly acquired relevance.

Another interviewee who also went to a secondary technical school argued that he left the course half-way, when he was sixteen, because he suddenly decided he wanted to start working and earn some money. He argued that school had a practical value because "at least I read and write, and speak some English." Similarly, an interviewee said that although he left school at twelve,

> from there I learned a lot, all the same: how to write a letter or doing something, I was able to do it. And sums and similar things, I was good at that, you know. I can even do sums mentally, imagine that.

The diversity of school experiences reflected itself in the way the interviewees spoke about their learning experiences on the farm. All the ten interviewees suggested that they learned farming informally through hands-on experience. Nine said that they had helped out on the family farm since they were young, while the tenth interviewee said that his family had one field where they always cultivated wheat and learned more about market gardening when he got to know his future wife since her family were experienced farmers. An interviewee said he attended information meetings organised by the Agriculture Department or by the Mġarr Farmers' Co-operative. Another said that he had attended short courses but was mostly self-taught, using learning technologies that ranged from books to chat rooms on social media since

> you can get good information. They help me a lot, these social media that there are today. So whoever wants to use these things today is lucky, with regards to nutrients, types of cultivation, I don't know, diseases…

7.5   Learning *in* the co-op: the co-operative as an inclusive learning community

7.5.1   Learning *in* the co-op: Committee members

Three participants mentioned how they first learned about co-operatives from their fathers. It was their way of initiation into a world where farmers shed their silence and became decision makers, participating in agricultural and community politics. Grace's father had been president of the Ħal Millieri Farmers' Co-operative Society.

> They used to meet in our garage. [...] They used to come every Sunday. [...] I remember my father jotting down notes, and then they would raise those points during the meeting, and they would discuss. And after a week they would come back and tell him: Paul we managed to do this and so on.

The secretary of the co-op remembered how her father sat on the committee of the Farmers' Olive Oil Co-operative; being raised in the home of a co-operative activist led her to always think of co-operatives as synonymous with unity among farmers. Similarly, Charles recounted how his father had also been president of Ħal Millieri Farmers' Co-operative Society and delegate at FCCS when it set up a tomatoes processing plant. He argued,

> When I was young, they used to come and do the meetings in the garage, and I would go and listen to them speaking. So the idea of co-operatives was always with me. And I learned a lot. I learned from [my father] since I was young.

When his father retired he took his seat on the committee. Charles played a leading role in the Committee for the Safeguard of Rural Life at Għajn Tuffieħa and was a founder-member of KRM.

For others, co-operation was a novelty. John, the mastermind behind the setting up of the Committee for the Safeguard of Rural Life at Għajn Tuffieħa, said that he was an ordinary member of another co-op but was never involved in any leading role. He had to grope his way along to becoming an effective committee member of KRM, learning by trial and error. According to him, many of those who set up KRM had little or no experience in managing a farmers' and residents' co-operative. They learned these things

> by experiencing them, taking risks, trying to solve problems, learning from mistakes, because you are bound to make mistakes. And you cannot expect anybody to spoon-feed you about how you should proceed.

Robert joined the committee some years after the co-op was set up. He had heard about co-ops from his social studies lessons at secondary school. Before joining the co-op he did a lot of research to know what KRM was all about. However, he argued that one can only learn to become an effective committee member while working with others on the committee, a two-way learning process forged in the dialectic between individual and group learning. Individuals learned while learning how to work in a group; the committee learned while learning about what each member was able to contribute towards the co-operative enterprise.

What did members learn while both learning processes were in motion? First of all they learned how to reflect, discuss, decide and act together, the art of praxis. Charles recalled the two years spent in campaigning against the golf course and the Manikata by-pass. Commenting with pride upon the meetings and protest marches he participated in he said that,

> Everyone had his opinion; when we needed to protest we protested... I feel very satisfied, because everyone contributed, we worked in unison, and we endured a lot because we spent two years struggling. But we succeeded, and we spoke with scholarly people, and for me it was an experience at the same time. I'm proud we did what we did.

The campaign also taught participants how to be resilient. Charles pointed out that he learned that

> especially in those cases where you think you're on the right side, you should never give up. And that when you're speaking up for the truth you should never give up but keep on working, to reach that aim, the one you're aiming at.

Reflecting upon the experience of setting up the co-op interviewees were very conscious of the difference between acting on one's own and acting as a group. Lucianne commented that within the committee decisions are taken through a process of collective reflection. John remarked that collectively taken decisions affect a number of people, not just a single person or the committee. This brings with it a responsibility that bears upon those participating in decision-making processes, arguing that "When you need to decide, on a management committee, you're going to affect many people, you're going to affect many plots of land." Consequently, the co-op committee had learned to take everybody's needs into consideration, even if this meant taking decisions that would not please everybody.

There was a general awareness among interviewees about the fact that they came from different education backgrounds and full-time occupations. Lucianne commented that this was a challenge because at the cultural capital level the diversity ranged from people who had been to university to people who could not use a computer. Dealing with this diversity and working together notwithstanding, was a very important social skill the committee had learned. Everybody's worth was appreciated since as Lucianne said,

There will be moments when you'd say: that person doesn't have anything to offer. But then there would be other moments when you'd say: he too has something to offer. So it's important that anyone who comes from a different background is involved.

Once this symbiosis was achieved, diversity became strength. As Charles argued, "one can also learn from his comrades, when you speak with one or speak with the other you always learn." Interviewees were conscious of the fact that committee members brought with them different skills and experiences; together they made the committee of KRM quite a unique conglomeration. Charles noted that in certain things

there will be others who are more able than you are, and this gives you courage to work. [...] I'm not really good at sending emails and similar things. [...] As for myself, with regards to agriculture and sometimes even common sense or for example when we set up the greengrocery, I was more experienced in that field. In that area I felt like I had more experience than others. Others had experience in other things. It's useless that everybody is experienced only in agriculture. If there is a mixture of people you can make better progress.

In a collective open to diversity the individual can find space to explore her strengths since as Magdalene argued, "we all come from different backgrounds and so everybody chooses the field in which he or she can contribute."

Interviewees also learned more about the Manikata community, especially interviewees who did not live in the centre of the village or who had settled there from elsewhere. The co-op roped in the local parish into the annual Pumpkin Feast while a number of volunteers from the village gave a helping hand in the activity. The co-op also procured many of its services for the restoration of the *Razzett tal-Qasam* farmstead and of the former Armoury of the Royal Marines Training Centre from local service providers including electrical installation works, rubble wall building, excavation services and metal works. For a couple of years Robert was responsible for much of the procurement and argued that through this work he,

learned a lot more about Manikata. Because previously I used to live in Manikata, on the outskirts of the village, I passed through it to go to work, and that's it. I was not very much involved. But since I got into the co-operative, given that the co-operative is active in the village, I learned who the people of the village are, I learned more about how the people of the village live; I learned more about the customs of the village.

The two-year campaign against the golf course and the by-pass was a veritable hands-on learning experience in the use of the spoken and the written word. The first

step towards, sharpening the dialogical skills, was the shedding of a subservient attitude by the farmers on the Committee. They had to face the authorities with solid arguments but also with an attitude. An activist said that

> I learned a lot from it. Because when you meet the authorities, people in authority, and you speak with them, that's already a step forward, compared to what happened previously when farmers did not go to speak to the prime minister or the leader of the opposition, for no [reason]. We kind of were shy of speaking to a person of that rank. Through this, the co-op, I also learned how to speak and how to write. I learned a lot through that.

Another Committee member argued that they also learned how to speak and how to write as a political act, defending their rights as tenant farmers while engaging with politicians. The interviewees reveal a kind of awe at the fact that they had managed to engage with politicians in political encounters where politicians painted themselves into a corner. The farmers learned that their greatest enemy was not the might of the politicians but their own lack of self-confidence, at individual and at collective level. Illustrative of this was a meeting that the Committee had with a number of ministers, including the Minister of Tourism Francis Zammit Dimech who was piloting the golf course project. Commenting on this meeting an interviewee said

> There's another thing I learned, the way how when we did meetings with certain people whom we had always seen on television, always speaking bombastically, we then went there and ended up almost dictating the meeting and we put them into a corner and they couldn't give us a clear answer there and then. Which means that they weren't able to rebut the arguments we confronted them with. So especially when we had that meeting with nearly half the ministerial cabinet, we understood the real reason why the meeting was held. We thought it was because they wanted to discuss with us. But it was nothing of the sort. It was simply that the following day Francis Zammit Dimech had a business breakfast and wanted to say that he had met us and agreed with us and that we had agreed. But in reality we had not agreed to anything.

The same activist said that through the campaign the participating farmers learned how to play the politicians' game by showing disagreement in an orderly, organised and effective manner. He commented that he

> learned to reason things out in a way that I quarrel with somebody by entering into a discussion with him, I show where I'm in disagreement with him. I learned that I shouldn't just say that I disagree but I also give my views about why I disagree, why I think I disagree. And if possible, offer alternatives for the project. In this case it was the golf course. They were bringing up the excuse that they needed to get thirty thousand tourists [...] As a committee we showed them there were other ways how to get tourists without doing the golf course.

For his part Charles pointed out that many farmers are usually silent in public meetings that concern them. He argued that participating in co-op committees gives a farmer dialogical and public speaking skills as well as provides him with the right knowledge necessary to put up a convincing argument. These skills would develop as he encounters more people, learning new things along the way, shedding inhibitions and gaining self-confidence. In his own words,

> If you are not involved in these co-operatives [...], going to meetings, you wouldn't be able to say a word, because you would be shy and say to yourself: what am I going to say? The more you speak and get involved the more you would be able to speak and learn and speak with different people. I know farmers who come to meetings but never ask a single question, never propose anything. [...] This is not right. If a person has a difficulty, whatever it is, he should express himself and speak and not shy away. So the more you participate it's like you feel more comfortable to speak up and do not bother about it.

Learning in the co-operative was also about creating a sustainable and financially viable business enterprise. Some of the interviewees came to the committee with some knowledge of managing a business enterprise. But managing a new business enterprise where decisions are taken collectively and with the common good in mind was a different kind of thing. Robert was employed as a manager in a food factory. While the turnover at the firm was much greater, fulfilling his leading role at the co-op was much more difficult since as he explained,

> even though I have a managerial position at the work place, I don't have the financial targets under my responsibility, I don't have the onus of ensuring a certain turnover or similar things. But when you're on the committee of a co-op which is still a baby, still growing up, and has big and ambitious projects in hand, you have a responsibility and you have to see how you're going to ensure that you succeed. And that was quite a challenge for me.

Some interviewees said that they learned skills they could use elsewhere. Charles argued that in the committee you learn how to express yourself and shed your shyness. Now, whenever he attends a public meeting organised for farmers he stands up and gives his opinion, commenting that "If I don't speak it's like I have not gone to the meeting at all." John got elected to the committee of *Koperattivi Malta* to represent the agricultural sector. He was crucial in bringing back farmers' co-ops into the fold of *Koperattivi Malta* since their representatives had been eliminated from various posts within the organisation through a block vote. Consequently he represented *Koperattivi Malta* in Brussels where legislation was being discussed, as well as in meetings of Copa-

cogeca, the organisation of European farmers' co-operatives and associations. At the time of the interview he was considering leaving KRM in order to help *Koperattivi Malta* set up social co-operatives, taking his learned skills, attitudes and knowledge to a new dimension. Similarly, Lucianne, who was about to graduate in social work, argued that the ability to cope with diversity in the committee would help her to be sensitive to the staff and the families she would be working with in the near future. She remarked that even when working with those facing the greatest difficulties, "you still have to consider them as having something to give and to contribute to society."

7.5.2   Learning *in* the co-op: the employees

Four of the committee members interviewed were also part-time employees of KRM and were involved in three main business areas that were the general administration, the Manikata Rural Heritage Trail and the co-op Sunday store.

Magdalene said she learned in the process of preparing herself well to be able to host school groups on the Trail. She learned from one of the farmers who used to be in the fields when students visited. She then carried out further research to make sure that what she was saying to students was in line with the schools' programmes. She argued that this was an interesting learning process for her because "these were things that interest me." Both Magdalene and Lucianne highlighted the fact that working on the Trail enabled them to learn personal and social skills. Lucianne said that taking people around the Trail was a job of responsibility that boosted her self-esteem since

> you feel a great satisfaction because you say to yourself: see, I've managed, a group of twenty people, I've taken them around the place, explained to them... I've taken that role. The co-operative has given me that opportunity, and that was important for me.

Magdalene said that taking people around the Trail, especially adults, could sometimes be challenging and she was always afraid that she might not be able to answer any of their questions. Working on the Trail was a process of overcoming her shyness while practising public speaking, since

> in a way you need to do public speaking because if you have a group of forty people or more, you need to speak in a manner that everybody understands, that you keep everybody interested, that the information you're giving is good, correct, not inventing things off the cuff, you need to do research.

Similarly, Benedict had some experience as a vegetable hawker years back but since he took over as salesman at the co-op store he "learned a lot and I have come to know how to deal with people, how to interact with them."

At management level, Robert said that even if he occupied a management role at the factory he worked for, when it came to managing the co-op it was a very difficult job. Shouldering responsibility at the co-op, he learned the hard way. Similarly, Magdalene said that she had never studied marketing, and at times she didn't know where to begin. Marketing KRM's services was thus a very big challenge for her; sometimes it was frustrating to see that the co-op failed to promote its services properly.

Another challenge for Magdalene was learning to manage flexible working hours. Doing administrative work from home it was not always easy for her to establish boundaries between work and family. She argued that this was a disadvantage and "sometimes I feel like I want to kick [the co-op] out of my life because I feel it has taken over most of my life."

However, working in a co-op where the onus of carrying the business forward falls squarely on the workers and the management committee, is a learning experience that pushes those involved to explore their own potential. Speaking about her leading role in issuing internal newsletters, sending out newspaper items about co-op activities or giving out interviews for the media, Magdalene said that she had always thought this was something beyond her. Working for the co-op helped her to explore her capabilities and stretch herself beyond the limits. In her own words, "with the co-op I learned many things, and I challenge myself to do things I have never dreamt I'd be able to do."

7.6   Learning *from* the Co-op: members, volunteers, customers and the general public.

An interviewee spoke about the golf course and by-pass campaign as an experience that forged a relationship between the Għajn Tuffieħa farmers and Maltese civil society organisations. Judging from what Manikata interviewees said, the bilateral meetings

held throughout the two-year campaign enabled environmental NGOs and politicians to learn about the farmers' viewpoint, the attachment that existed between the farmer and his land, as well as the need to protect Maltese agriculture and rural life. According to John the learning that went on in the process manifested itself in the support that civil society organisations gave to the Committee, among other things through writings in the newspapers. This response seems to have encouraged the Committee to keep putting pressure on the government, "because you would see that you're not alone, there are others who share our viewpoint."

Interviewees spoke about how they learned from the co-op by attending training courses organised by it. KRM has organised training courses since its setting up in order to address skills gaps related to its core business. Courses included food handling, first aid, food processing, and the cultivation and care of fruit and olive trees. Participants commented that courses were practical and useful for their everyday lives on the farm and also in work related to the co-op. An interviewee said that the first-aid course was very interesting and found it useful and handy shortly afterwards. Another interviewee said that since he prepared jams for the co-op, the food-handling course was very useful for him. Anthony commented about the fact that the courses were held in Manikata late in the evening, at a time that was convenient for farmers. Miriam, a regular volunteer in co-op activities, spoke in terms of accessibility of useful knowledge. She commented that she had only been to primary school and her access to useful knowledge was restricted to television. Being able to attend training courses at the co-op meant having another learning tool at hand since, "You might ask me: don't you learn from television? Yes, but the fact that they tell you and explain things to you is better than watching television." Courses were always open to members of the local community. Charles argued that this should be developed further in order to help the local community understand the benefits of healthy eating; this would give more reasons to the locals to patronise the co-op store.

People also learned from the co-op by doing volunteer work, mostly in community activities that KRM organised throughout the year, particularly the annual Pumpkin Feast. Socialising through volunteering in co-op activities had a learning dimension to it. As Miriam argued, in acting together people learn from each other because

you don't remain always closed in your own home. I think you can learn [...] That's how I feel, that when you help others you're learning, from others, on what's the best way. And I like that too.

Magdalene pointed out that the contribution of women in activities related to the preparation of typical local food was vital. She took Grace as an example; even though she didn't have any formal qualifications, she was a very good cook and her recipes were crucial to make the Pumpkin Feast such a successful event. The co-op had legitimised Grace's knowledge about local cuisine and turned it into a community-building tool. Playing traditional roles, female volunteers had learned how to organise successful community events, creating spaces where they could learn from each other. As Liam Kane (2001) argues about mothers of the Plaza de Mayo,

> paradoxically it was precisely by playing on the traditional role of motherhood that their political struggle was so effective, leading the Mothers to adopt roles which were anything but traditional (Kane, 2001, p.113).

Interviewees also identified the visitors to the Manikata Rural Heritage Trail as people who might have learned from the co-op. Magdalene manages the bookings. She remarked how students learned through hands-on activities and this gave the co-op an advantage over competitors. Visitors feed animals, walk through the fields, see historical and archaeological artefacts, sow seeds in pots to take home, and enjoy the scenery of the Għajn Tuffieħa district. Thus, "whoever comes is bound to learn and also enjoy himself." She also remarked that the Trail helped the general public appreciate how much the Maltese farmer has to put into his work in terms of financial investment, time and energy. She commented that,

> the fact that the co-op is also creating awareness on the importance of the farmer's work, and that the farmer's work is not an easy job, and that there's a problem because the number of farmers is decreasing, I think that it is making a contribution.

Charles, who manages the co-op's Sunday store, was of the opinion that customers at the co-op store learned about the qualities of fresh produce. Vegetables were usually picked on Saturdays and Sundays according to demand. The fact that customers bought fresh produce directly from farmers through their co-op forged a relationship of trust between customers and producers, a relationship that is at the heart of what Wayne Roberts (2008, p.52) refers to as "food sovereignty", enabling producers and customers to have more control over the food they consume.

7.7 Learning *for* the co-op: is the co-op a credible and effective answer to the farmers' and residents' needs?

7.7.1 The challenges for farmers and community

The Manikata interviewees identified a number of challenges that the community was facing. The first was enabling farmers to secure their land tenure. An interviewee said that when the golf course issue was over, he still felt uneasy about the issue; being part of a group gave him some reassurance. While the interviews were under way another member of the co-op was being threatened with eviction from one of his fields to make way for a parking area outside an archaeological site and was seeking the help of the co-op.

Eight interviewees considered the importation of foreign produce as another major challenge. An interviewee who had invested in vineyards said that wine was being imported indiscriminately and this was putting pressure on Maltese wine makers and on grape-producing farmers. Another said that even processed tomatoes for the production of locally manufactured pasta sauces were being imported. Interviewees argued that Sicilian producers had economies of scale that enabled them to invest in better packaging, something that the small Maltese farmers could only achieve by organising themselves. Two full-time farmers mentioned the rising costs of production. According to one of them this made the contribution of women in agriculture even more important because "especially today we have so many outlays and competition that it's not viable to hire people to help you in the fields." Four interviewees argued that farmers were not getting their fair share from middlemen at the central vegetable market. One argued that sometimes farmers tried to circumvent the payment system by asking middlemen to pay them in cash rather than by the usual payment voucher. By doing so they exposed their vulnerability even further, giving more leeway to the middlemen to dictate prices. An interviewee argued passionately that the Maltese farmer

> is working hard, forking out money, dumping produce at the central vegetable market and from then onwards he loses absolutely every control over his own produce and he leaves it in other people's hands to decide how much he should earn. If the farmers are not going to get together, seriously, and start retailing their own products, they are heading towards total collapse.

In the face of failed collective action, farmers resorted to intensive cultivation. As the Mġarr farmers had argued, this exacerbated the problem since greater amounts of local produce were mercilessly dumped at the central market, putting more pressure on prices. Intensive cultivation was also directly related to greater reliance on fertilizers and pesticides. KRM interviewees linked this to two different issues. The first one was public health. An interviewee argued that farmers need to understand that

> if they are going to use pesticides excessively they are obviously going to affect people's lives. So that's what I think is needed, more learning, so that they become conscious.

The second issue was the effect of intensive agriculture on the quantity and the quality of water in the aquifer. As the Mġarr farmers had argued, farmers drilled boreholes for all-year-round irrigation to increase production. This was depleting the water table at an unsustainable rate since extraction was exceeding replacement through absorption of rainwater back into the aquifer. Manikata farmers spoke also about the quality of water. If fertilizers and pesticides were used indiscriminately, nitrates would continue to pollute the water table, people's health would be under threat and the authorities would tighten their grip on the use of underground water for agriculture. An interviewee argued what was at stake was "the sustainability of agriculture."

Interviewees also pointed out the dwindling number of full-time farmers. An interviewee said that this was reflected in the ageing population of farmers on co-ops' committees. He argued that "if they're not going to change and involve young people on committees they're not going to achieve anything at all."

Three interviewees also mentioned the natural elements that also leave their toll on fields and farmers' investments. Another mentioned the increasing number of pests that farmers have to deal with because of indiscriminate importation of plants.

As regards to building local co-operative networks, the co-op had tried to forge a working relationship with the Mellieħa Local Council, under whose responsibility the hamlet of Manikata actually lies. There were instances when the co-op worked hand in hand with the Council, such as when it enabled the local authority to win the EDEN Destination of Excellence award (European Commission, 2008, no pagination). The Council had also helped the co-op in its ambitious project of reclaiming *Il-Bajjad* abandoned fields, turning them into olive groves, by donating the first trees. At other

times the relationship between the Council and the co-op was not positive. For example, on winning the EDEN award, the hamlet of Manikata was practically ignored in celebrating it, notwithstanding the fact that it was one of the main stakeholders in making the bid for the award. Establishing a working relationship with an elected Council, where the majority periodically alternates between the two main political parties, and where local electoral campaigns are frequently used as a stepping stone for a run at a seat in the national parliament, is always challenging. Asking a leading member of the co-op's committee about the prospects of establishing a good working relationship with the Council, shortly after an election that brought a change in the Council majority, he argued that

> in the past we didn't have very positive experiences. Now there seems to be a ray of hope. I don't know what will happen in the future. But I think we would be a little bit... you know, we'd speak to each other and see what we can organise and do... I think that if there'd be mutual understanding and try to work together, it's better than no co-operation.

The co-op's committee has had to be very careful not to get entangled in petty bickering between rival candidates where what was at stake were not political issues but personal self-promotion.

Finally interviewees mentioned challenges related to the developing architectural and social landscape of Manikata. An interviewee spoke about the fine line between development and conservation, noting that "it's good that the village grows but it's bad to see the village lose its character." The architectural landscape changed from a sparsely built environment to a contained urban development. But the interviewee was also concerned about the social dynamics of the place. In the past the local community lived a secluded life revolving around family farms. Outsiders brought new social dynamics but the channels of communication between locals and outsiders, and the processes that brought people together or forced them into defensive modes were still not well defined. In the interviewee's words, "there is a little bit of confusion between the traditional inhabitants and their attitude and the incomers who came to live here from outside and are trying to settle inside here." His words betrayed a sense of insecurity, arguing that he would not want that "that which is traditionally linked to Manikata is lost and replaced by the new." On the other hand he argued that newcomers to the village have also been a positive disturbance.

7.7.2   What can co-operation contribute to make life different?

The Manikata co-operative started off as a stand-off with the authorities over the construction of a golf course and a by-pass in the hamlet. Georgakopoulos (2011) quotes the then Minister for Tourism, Dr Francis Zammit Dimech arguing that "It is a fact which no one can deny; tourists of a certain level require more golf courses. I have seen this personally in other countries that compete with us, such as Cyprus." She also quotes the Department of Information that in a statement said that "There is a great need for another golf course in Malta for tourism purposes" (2011, p.24). This was the dominant discourse being flaunted in Malta in 2005. It was a discourse that was gathering hegemonic consensus within civil society, especially since tourism was always considered to be the backbone of Maltese economy, accounting for about a quarter of the annual GDP. It was also supported by the construction industry that would have greatly benefited from both projects. In fact the same Georgakopoulos also quotes Mr John Ebejer, Chairperson of the Building Industry Consultative Council as saying that

> Countries which compete with us have a variety of golf courses; this is an option that Malta can never provide... The issue was not for Malta to become a golfing destination but at least if someone was willing to play golf there was the possibility (Georgakopoulos, 2011, p.18, 24).

However, she is also quick to comment that

> Despite these comments, I have not come across any empirical data which shows that another golf course would have improved Malta's tourism industry. This might be an indication that policies for development may sometimes be based on hunches without any prior evidence (Georgakopoulos, 2011, p.24).

It was not difficult for the young researcher to notice that the golf course issue was, to borrow a term from Gramsci, a 'war of position' between two discourses jockeying for consensus within civil society. The discourse fanned by Minister Zammit Dimech argued that a golf course built on farmland was something to be accepted as a matter of course due to its perceived contribution to the tourism industry and its expected multiplier effect in other sectors such as construction. It was propped up by the Government's apparatus and a sympathetic small section of the media. On the other hand a 'structures of feeling' was forming itself within civil society, and slowly turning itself into a well-articulated oppositional discourse fighting for consensus in its own right. It was another world view that contended that Malta had had enough of

environmental destruction in the name of economic development, and that a new paradigm for development was needed, one that valued the natural environment and the people that lived in or benefited from it. It was a dispersed 'structures of feeling' that gathered shape and form strong enough to finally carry the day. The government's hegemonic stance on the issue was eroded through the consensus that built up around the oppositional anti-golf course coalition and the project fell through.

The first thing that the Manikata farmers and residents involved in the Committee for the Safeguard of Rural Life in Għajn Tuffieħa learned from participating in the fight for consensus around the anti-golf course and anti-by-pass block was the case for co-operation. The battle was won because farmers and residents co-operated with each other within the hamlet and because they sought to build alliances with other groups, mainly environmental NGOs. Once the golf course and by-pass ordeal was over, they thought that they should give a more permanent shape to the relationships they had built at local community level and put the sense of agency they had acquired to good use by building a stronger, more permanent structure. They resorted to the co-operative model in order to put forward their own projects for development. Rather than depart from a position of power in a top-down process, people would look around them to see what was already positive and good about their community and their environment and build upon it. It was a paradigm that would safeguard what was good and positive in terms of natural environment, historical and archaeological heritage, agriculture, cuisine, but also human relationships and attachments to the birth place or living space. It was an oppositional paradigm that would sustain these positive elements through collective grassroots action rather than wipe out what already existed. The activists involved in the Manikata Committee thought they could achieve this through the founding of a community-based co-operative. Interviewees argued that the co-op's Manikata Rural Heritage Trail at *Il-Bajjad* had become a successful community-based project that in its first six years had managed to attract 25,000 visitors, rehabilitating abandoned fields at no cost to tenant farmers. The ten interviewees considered the setting up of *Koperattiva Rurali Manikata* as a collective decision that could help safeguard farmers' and residents' right to enjoy their village, their landscape, their fields, their living and their way of life.

Secondly, they learned that co-operation could give some level of assurance to farmers with regards to their land tenure. From the late 1960s onwards the construction industry was a very important economic contributor. Anything the

construction industry did, in terms of building hotels, villas for British expatriates, industrial estates for foreign-owned factories, housing estates for a growing working class, and roads to connect the expanding villages and towns, was seen as a contribution to the development of an alternative economy weaned off from the British military base in the run-up to its closure in 1979. Agriculture was rarely considered to have any substantial role to play in this, and farmers had no business in opposing state driven development projects that helped to build a self-sustaining modernised economy. What the farmers had fought against during the anti-golf course and anti-by-pass campaign was not simply an arrogant form of government but also a public perception built around the notion that anything that would bring more tourists and create jobs was a good enough reason to kick a farmer out of his fields. Fields were not considered as productive workplaces but as empty spaces waiting to be turned to good use. A government slogan very much publicised at the time the golf course was being branded about as the next big thing was: Tourism feeds everyone[4]. It was a neo-liberal slogan based on a belief in the proverbial trickling down of the economy. The reality is that the salaries paid in certain sectors of the hospitality industry are so low that very few Maltese people are taking up jobs in the sector and the industry is surviving on foreign workers who are willing to work for minimum wages. Characteristically, in 2013 a member of the co-op was threatened with eviction because his field along the road from Manikata to Mġarr was needed to build a public parking for tourist buses visiting a nearby Roman bath complex. The environment impact assessment document expressed concern that a canopy built over the archaeological complex might disturb the flight of bats that live in the area. But not a single word was written about the farmer's eviction; he was simply invisible to the authors[5].

In order to safeguard their right to their land, farmers needed to sustain the struggle to change this perception within civil society. Interviewees thought that the setting up of a co-op was helping to construct an alternative discourse around the worth of farmers as contributors to the economy and as guardians of rural landscapes. This aim was reached at least in two ways. First the co-op stood up for farmers with the authorities when the need arose. Secondly it continued to foster a positive relationship

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[4] *Mit-turiżmu jiekol kulħadd*.

[5] The co-op sent messages to the Ministry for Tourism that it was against this project. It is not sure what discussions went on within the Ministry but the farmer was personally informed that the project had been shelved and the co-op considered the case as closed.

with the general public, especially by hosting informative visits to the Manikata Rural Heritage Trail. As Magdalene argued,

> the fact that the co-operative is raising awareness about the importance of the farmer's work, that the farmer's work is not an easy one, and that there's a problem because farmers are dwindling, I think that that way the co-op is making a contribution.

As for the challenges of the common market and the resulting loss of income, the members of KRM saw in the co-op a way how to potentially increase farmers' income by coming together and by-pass the central market middlemen. This was being done through the co-op's Sunday store. Farmers supplying the store got a fair and timely pay. Moreover, the store belonged to the farmers themselves and any profits would be re-invested in other initiatives for the benefit of the local community. As the interviews were underway the committee was discussing ways how the co-op Sunday store could be turned into an open-daily greengrocery. The aim was to increase turnover, profitability, as well as the relevance of the store to local farmers. An interviewee from the committee spoke about the committee's lack of marketing skills while others mentioned the fact that the store was not located on a busy thoroughfare and did not benefit much from passing traffic. But the committee were ready to take the plunge by upgrading the physical outlay of the store, consolidating the client base and developing an accounting system that would give up-to-date cash flow information. Concurrently, the co-op strengthened its marketing label, encouraging a number of its members to process food themselves and sell those products under the co-op label. Fruit jams, wine, olive oil and preserves were produced by different members and sold to visitors on the Trail and at the Sunday store. Activities such as the annual Pumpkin Feast, organised by the co-op in conjunction with the Manikata parish church volunteers and a small sponsorship from the Mellieħa Local Council, was another way of promoting local fresh fruits and vegetables, wine, olive oil and jams, selling directly to customers who flock to the village on the day of the fair. At the bottom line these activities were a way of facing up to the challenge of competition across EU borders through co-operation at the local level. The co-operative has proved to be a catalyst for bringing stakeholders together, empowering them to address their own needs and concerns by establishing a number of alliances at local community level. The result was a number of initiatives that were contributing to increase local farmers' income by reaching out in different ways to customers. It looks like EU policies based on the free movement of goods are setting farmers from different parts of the EU in competition

with each other. In its own small world the co-op is fighting off that paradigm by promoting co-operation and local networking.

On the downside, the co-op had not yet brought any substantial change towards a more sustainable form of agriculture. There was a general feeling among interviewees that organic agriculture was the ideal but farmers also felt that it was very hard to survive on organic production[6]. In the co-op there was also a general feeling that there should be more awareness about the negative effects of the use of pesticides and fertilizers. In fact, the co-op organized a training session dealing with the safe handling of pesticides and fertilizers. One of them started using organic pest controls on his olive trees at *Il-Bajjad*. When the interviews were underway one member of the co-op was converting his farm to organic cultivation. But in the main the co-operative had failed to make a breakthrough in this regard. An interviewee argued that "there needs to be more education, so that [farmers] become more conscious that with their cultivation they are affecting society." She quoted a recent study that said that the Maltese people had a high level of chemical residues in their bodies originating from pesticides. Historically, agriculture had been organic but the use of fertilizers and pesticides had been introduced by agricultural experts from the Department of Agriculture. Farmers had come to accept them as the norm; a discourse of modernity and entrepreneurship had been constructed around their use. Consequently farmers had become dependent upon them. In order to convert back to organic they had to unlearn that dependence and learn how to put their health, the health of the consumer and the general well-being of the natural environment before production and profits. The Department of Agriculture was not as keen to enable farmers to convert back to organic as it had been keen and assiduous in enticing farmers to use synthetic fertilizers and pesticides. Once again the shift towards a better quality of life had to come from the grassroots. Within the Manikata co-op there was the general awareness that this was the new direction they should follow. But by the time the research was under way this new direction was held to be idyllic and elusive.

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[6] This same feeling was expressed by Rose from the Mġarr co-op who said she had visited organic farms abroad but was not in the least impressed by them.

7.8   Conclusion

In this chapter I have described how a farmers' and residents' committee set up to oppose government-sponsored projects had resorted to the co-operative model in order to move from a reactive stance to a proactive one that would offer an alternative, at times oppositional model for local development.

I then went into the four main aims pursued by the co-operative: defending the rights of tenant farmers, promoting local development through bottom-up processes, getting into the direct retail of farmers' produce by setting up a co-op fruit and vegetable store, and, fourthly, investing in non-formal education by organising training courses for members and for the local community.

Then I discussed the diversity among the interviewees in terms of age, gender, educational background and full-time jobs. It was evident that women played a pivotal role in the co-op since its setting up in 2007 while there was also a difference in age within the committee. Interviewees also had a very diverse educational background that ranged from barely finishing primary school, to attending fee-paying Church Schools, to going into further and tertiary education. But only two interviewees became full-time farmers. The divide between making it at school and becoming a farmer, so pronounced in Mġarr, repeated itself also in the Manikata interviews. In fact, the co-op providing only part-time jobs, the interviewees all came from different full-time jobs that ranged from agriculture to management, the caring professions and also home making. What linked interviewees together was that they all came from farm-owning families.

Three interviewees mentioned that they had been socialised into co-operation when still young, given that their fathers had been members of the management committee of a co-operative. Another interviewee was an ordinary member of another co-operative. However, all interviewees argued that they learned how to manage a co-op when they got involved in the setting up and running of the Committee for the Safeguard of Rural Life at Għajn Tuffieħa and later the *Koperattiva Rurali Manikata*. Interviewees learned how to discuss and take action together, how to be resilient, how to take decisions together keeping the common good in mind, and how to shoulder responsibility. There was also the awareness that diversity was in itself a challenge. Members of the committee had to take their time to understand what every member had to offer and to work together as a group, speak a common language and turn

diversity into a strength that gave added value to the co-op. Procuring goods and services from other people in the village, KRM members also learned about the hamlet and its people. More importantly, interviewees involved in both the Committee and later in *Koperattiva Rurali Manikata* mentioned that they had learned how to use the written and the spoken word as a political tool, coupled with a growing sense of self-confidence and the ability to speak in different fora. Interviewees also argued that they were learning how to run a collectively-owned business, going by trial and error and mainly relying on their own steam to generate funds. Finally interviewees argued that they were learning transferable skills. One of the interviewees also went on to become a member of the central committee of *Koperattivi Malta* and represented the Federation in meetings in Brussels and elsewhere.

The employees learned how to host visitors to the Manikata Rural Heritage Trail. They also learned how to manage finances and also how to market the co-op's products and services. One interviewee, a mother whose only job was her part-time job at the co-op and who did a lot of work from home, had to learn how to draw boundaries between working life and family life. Finally working for the co-op has made employees challenge themselves to achieve more.

Interviewees also identified a number of people who might have learned from the co-op even if they were not necessarily active participants within it. Employees mentioned how civil society had learned about farmers, agriculture and rural life through the work of the Committee for the Safeguard of Rural Life at Għajn Tuffieħa and its networking activities during its campaigns. Others had learned from the training courses which the co-op organised from time to time. Others learned while volunteering in the community activities organised by the co-op, especially during the annual Pumpkin Feast. This kind of social learning involved a number of females who brought different kinds of valuable traditional knowledge that within the co-op took a different dimension. The work initiated by the first Committee with regards to making the general public aware of what modern agriculture and rural life was all about was being carried forward by the co-op through its hosting of visitors on the Rural Heritage Trail. The Sunday store manager also argued that the store was helping customers to learn about the quality of freshly harvested fruits and vegetables while building a relationship with an expanding customer base.

Finally I mentioned a number of challenges that Manikata farmers and residents were facing. I then analysed how the members of the co-operative had learned to make co-operation work in addressing those challenges. First I argued that the golf course campaign was a 'war of position' for consensus among civil society. The Committee for the Safeguard of Rural Life in Għajn Tuffieħa had managed to network with an alliance that in the end managed to impose its own paradigm of an economic development that did not occur at the expense of the natural environment. The alternative and oppositional discourse of the Committee and the network it had helped to build carried the day against the dominant discourse of the government and its apparatus of power. I argued that the Manikata activists had learned that co-operation enabled them to carry this oppositional discourse forward, sustaining it by translating their oppositional stance into a paradigm for local development that manifested itself in the projects which the co-operative initiated in the locality for the benefit of locals and visitors.

Secondly I argued that interviewees had learned that co-operation could help them educate the public about the value of the contemporary farmer's work, that it was not okay to sacrifice agriculture in the name of the construction or the tourism industries. The latter had been constructed as economic priorities in dominant economic discourse. The co-op enabling farmers make their voice heard and to win consensus among public opinion both by standing up for them and by informing the public about the farmer's contribution to the economy.

Thirdly I argued that co-operators at Manikata were using their co-op to challenge the EU mentality of competition across borders through co-operation at local level, empowering local farmers to come together to create opportunities for farmers to sell their products directly to customers, either at the co-op store, on the Rural Heritage Trail or in community activities such as the Pumpkin Feast.

Finally I argued that the co-operative had not been effective in bringing about a change in agricultural practices from conventional to organic agriculture. Co-operative members were aware of the benefits that organic cultivation would bring to farmers, to customers and to the aquifer. One farmer had also started converting to organic production and the co-op also organised a training session on the safe use of pesticides and fertilizers. But in the main, farmers in Manikata remained sceptic about the possibility of converting a profitable farm from conventional to organic production.

In the next chapter I will compare the different kinds of learning that goes on in and around both co-operatives in the light of the theoretical framework developed in Chapter 2, highlighting the possibilities that co-operation opens up in different directions.

Chapter 8

Learning *in*, *from* and *for* the co-op. A comparison between the two case studies

8.1   Introduction

In 1.2 above, I quoted Griff Foley (2004) to foreground the parameters about the kind of learning that goes on and is created in social intercourse, such as "work, community action or family activities" (Foley, 2004, p.5). In 2.4 I also quoted John Dewey (1997) to argue that communication within and between groups is key to facilitate the transmission and the creation of knowledge, leading Dewey to claim that "not only does social life demand teaching and learning for its own permanence, but the very process of living together educates" (Dewey, 1997, p.6). For his part Etienne Wenger (1998) emphasises the almost unpredictability of social learning processes, arguing that while there is a need to design and programme learning processes, participating in the process of life is an educational process in itself. In his words,

> Learning cannot be designed. Ultimately, it belongs to the realm of experience and practice. It follows the negotiation of meaning; it moves on its own terms. It slips through the cracks; it creates its own cracks. Learning happens, design or no design (Wenger, 1998, p.225).

All this relates to the *how* of adult social learning processes.

One would also need to know the *what*. Again Foley (2004) mentions technical, social, cultural and political kinds of adult learning. In Foley's words, this wide array of learning would go from "about how to do a particular task" to "about how people relate to each other in a particular situation, about what their actual core values are, or about who has power and how they use it" (Foley, 2004, p.5).

Equally important is to ask *why* people would want to learn, what are their motivations to grow, and develop as individuals and as members of a collective.

Learning is basically a process of change and growth that is guided by a negotiation of values. From a critical perspective, it is a process that occurs in one's participation in the daily struggle for social justice and equity. In *Education as the Practice of Freedom* Freire (1998) would typically ascribe motivation to learn, change and grow to a person's willingness to participate in the historical process of changing the world in order to make it a place where everybody is able to reach human fulfilment. To a socially and politically conscious person this comes almost as an ontological imperative since in Freire's words,

> he knows that as a Subject he can and ought, together with other Subjects, to participate creatively in that process by discerning transformations in order to aid and accelerate them (Freire, 1998, p.12).

In this chapter I will revisit the previous two chapters and draw comparisons between them in the light of the ideological issues around learning which I raised in Chapter 2. I will delve into how members of the management committees, employees and volunteers in both rural co-operatives learn while taking part *in* co-op life. I will also analyse how members and non-members learn *from* the co-op life, services and activism. Finally I discuss the lessons that can be learnt *for* co-operatives. By this I mean to explore how co-operatives can contribute to a more socially just and equitable world. As I go through these issues I also ask what, how and why people learn and, as Foley suggests, "fail to learn" (Foley, 2004, p.5) while militating within co-operatives.

8.2   Learning *in* the co-op

What did committee members learn? The Mġarr committee interviewees mentioned how they learned to trust one another, to listen to each other and, in doing so, to look at issues from perspectives that are different from their own. They also learned how to accept the differing views of other people. Consequently they learned how to speak and to do so assertively. They also learned what to say, becoming knowledgeable about different issues. Finally the committee interviewees agreed that they learned how to turn their ability to speak into a political act, mainly in defence of farmers' rights. The Manikata committee participants learned how to analyse situations, reflect upon them, discuss, and then decide and act together. In this process they learned what to say and how to say it in order to achieve the desired political results when dealing with people in power. In this context they also learned to be resilient in the face of adversity. In the running of the co-operative they had set up they learned to deal with diversity among

participating committee members and to understand how every participant, in his or her diversity, could contribute to the co-op's enterprise. In deciding together they also learned to take different people's needs into consideration and shouldering responsibility for their decisions and actions. One particular interviewee learned more about the hamlet of Manikata and its people. There was also a shared feeling of learning about how to set up a business enterprise from scratch and steer it towards sustainability. Finally an interviewee suggested she was learning skills that she could use in her full-time job as a social worker, referring specifically to the ability to see everybody's worth and how any person has something to contribute towards society.

How did they learn this? Mġarr interviewees gave great importance to learning from each other's experience. This has to be taken in the light of the fact that no committee member had ever had formal training in fulfilling his post on the committee. Given that all of them had left school quite early, they had to learn basic skills needed in the running of a co-op from experience. Learning the craft from the experience of elders around the table was considered essential from all of the interviewees. They also argued that in order to learn one had to be open to change. Particularly with regards to the ability to speak out for farmers, interviewees said one needed to participate in as many meetings as possible, within and outside the co-op. And this in itself was a different way of sustaining one's learning, exposing oneself to different learning experiences. For their part the Manikata interviewees spoke how they learned from their two-year anti-golf course and anti-by-pass campaign. While the Mġarr farmers learned from each other's experiences as long standing members of the committee, the Manikata interviewees learned from each other's experiences in their different full-time jobs which ranged from full-time farming to management, to full-time university study, to working in a bank, to home making. They were aware that this made the participation in the committee a challenging but also stimulating experience. The possibility of discussing issues, deciding and acting together was also considered to be a major source of learning different things. Having to keep a different number of people's interests in mind throughout this process led participants in the process to stretch their abilities.

Why were participants willing to learn these things? There was a major preoccupation among Mġarr interviewees to want to be a voice for farmers in the face of major challenges that farmers in their village but also in the Maltese islands as a whole were facing. They wanted to be an effective voice that would be able to bring

about a change in the way decisions concerning Maltese agriculture were being taken in Valletta and in Brussels. In Manikata committee people were particularly concerned with wanting to be able to protect farmers' fields from being taken over for development projects decided by people in authority. They also wanted to learn because they wanted to make the co-op relevant to as many people in their community as possible. Another major concern was the need to learn how to make the co-op financially sustainable in the long term. Finally, an interviewee said that she wanted to learn because by participating in the co-op she was led to challenge herself to do different things she had never thought of doing.

Employees in both co-ops also found that working in the co-op was a learning experience. The Mġarr employees learned practical skills on the job, from using a computer, to driving a fork-lifter to providing good customer care. They learned useful practical knowledge related to products and services provided by the co-op store, as well as information related to political developments in the area of agriculture at national and EU levels. They also learned why farmers took certain stands on political issues that concerned them. Finally, a Mġarr employee mentioned how the co-op gave her the possibility to work flexible hours and thus was able to learn how to find the right balance between work, family and finding time for herself, including time to attend learning courses related to her interests. The Manikata employees were also members of the committee. But their work, mainly on the Rural Heritage Trail, was a source of learning. They had to learn about agriculture and about the natural and historical environment in order to be able to effectively host visitors, including students. Their work with different people helped them to build their self-esteem and to have practical experience of public speaking. Being responsible to practically create their own jobs they had to learn marketing techniques hands on. Finally, a Manikata interviewee also said that out of necessity she had to learn how to find the necessary balance between family and work and to draw clearer boundaries between the two.

How did employees learn these things? Both groups mentioned that they learned by listening to farmers, to learn things about agriculture but also about farmers' opinions on political issues. Both also mentioned the need to look up information on the internet in order to get important information needed to perform their job well, either at the co-op store in Mġarr or on the Rural Heritage Trail in Manikata. They also said that the fact that they needed to take the plunge and 'create' their job was a hands-on learning experience. At Mġarr employees needed to set up a

proper store, with a computer system and a shelving system and have useful information at hand to be provided over the counter. At Manikata they had to learn how to host visitors and students, providing them with the relevant information to make their experience of rural life more complete.

Why did they learn these things? Both showed a concern for the need to provide a good service to clients, be it at the agricultural supplies store at Mġarr or on the Rural Heritage Trail in Manikata. Both also felt the need to promote the co-op's services, although this was more felt at Manikata where the need for creating a financially sustainable organisational structure was more felt given that the co-op was still in its infancy and considering also that the employees were members of the committee and thus shouldered the responsibility for the success or failure of the co-operative enterprise. On the other hand, at Mġarr, the need to increase sales was interpreted by the employees as a way of proving themselves with the committee. It was a process of building trust between a committee entirely made up of full-time farmers, with limited business management knowledge, and the employees, who were not members of the committee and were entrusted with turning around the co-op shop from an ailing venture into a successful enterprise. This trust building process was crucial for learning to happen on both the committee's and employees' side, since as Wilkinson and Pickett (2010) argue, in situations where there is a high level of trust "people feel secure, they have less to worry about, they see others as co-operative rather than competitive" (Wikinson and Pickett, 2010, p.57). In both co-ops employees were aware that their job was a learning process and were keen to learn more, both on the job and also by attending courses that would enable them to improve their performance.

Members from both co-ops had learned how to turn private troubles into public woes (Shaw, 2008, p.13), an essential characteristic of committed communities. This was especially evident in the Mġarr co-op's preoccupation with speaking up for farmers and with being a voice for them with the authorities. The Manikata co-op had actually come into existence as a result of a campaign which aimed to stand up for farmers who were going to lose their land and for villagers who were going to lose their hamlet, with its way of life.

Communities are also the places where identities are created and re-created. Both co-ops showed how participants developed distinct identities as members or

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employees of both co-ops while learning in the co-op. Two full-time farmers, one from Mġarr and one from Manikata, developed their distinct identity as presidents and leaders of their co-op. It was an identity that built upon their success as full-time farmers but helped them to develop their distinct leadership within the co-op, particularly manifested in their ability to use the spoken word in order to speak up for others. Two mothers, one employed by each co-op, also spoke about how their identity as mother and as employee sometimes were in harmony, made possible by the ability to work flexible hours and to work from home. At other times the two identities collided and one employee spoke about how she had to learn to draw demarcation lines between both spheres so that the stress related to work would not impinge too much on her family life. However, both female employees had also spoken about how, through their work with the co-op, they had developed their identities as leaders. In the case of Mġarr she spoke about how she learned to run a successful co-op store and prove herself to the management co-op. In the case of Manikata the female employee spoke about how work in the co-op helped her to move beyond her comfort zone and constantly learn new things.

A community is a voluntary act. It does not just happen. And members of that community are aware of what brings them together. Reflecting about their learning in the co-op interviewees had shown that the co-op was an organisation that thrived on the voluntary willingness of committed members of the local community to come together and act for the common good. Interviewees were aware that they were in the co-op for a reason and that there were shared aims that were keeping activists together, as committee members and as employees. In Mġarr there was this shared feeling of having to speak up for farmers with the authorities, of having to provide members with a well-stocked agricultural supplies store and also the need to provide customers with a good service. At Manikata there was the shared feeling of participating and learning from the process of setting up a community-owned enterprise that would defend the farmers' right to their land and the villagers' right to their rural way of life. There was the feeling that this would be done by developing projects that would promote all that was positive in the hamlet, its environment and its people. Particularly in the Manikata case, there was a shared feeling of activists and employees setting in motion a process of praxis, of a participative process of reflection, decision making and action, a process that carried with it the responsibility of acting on behalf of and for the common good of the community. In both co-ops there was also the

shared awareness about the need to secure the financial sustainability of the enterprise, but particularly more so in Manikata where the enterprise was being created from scratch.

A community creatively responds to internal and external stimuli at individual and collective level. The community then creates and re-creates itself as it responds to these stimuli. The learning in both co-ops is entwined in this interactive process. As participants learned in the co-op, they responded to internal stimuli. At Mġarr, new committee members responded to the stimulus provided by the more experienced members by listening, trusting, assimilating, and finally by contributing their own opinions and ideas. At Manikata the stimuli emanated from the diversity within the group where members came from different full-time occupations and professions. This diversity was seen as a challenge to deal with. But it was also acknowledged that this diversity provided a wealth of opinions, perceptions and competences. Interviewees from both case studies argued that these internal dialogical processes not only impinge upon the nature of the collective but also change the individuals that take part in them. At Mġarr it was argued that one will learn to consider issues from perspectives that are different from one's own. At Manikata it was argued that everybody is important in the process because everybody brings a different contribution that makes the collective a unique conglomeration and the individual a unique cog in a colourful wheel. Both collectives also reacted to external stimuli. At Mġarr the co-op community reacted to the need of the farming community of having adequate agricultural supplies and of having a body that would advocate on its behalf. It also reacted to the quality of political decision-making mechanisms and processes that are often detached from the grassroots. At Manikata the co-op reacted to the need of tenant farmers to enjoy security of tenure, and the need of the community to enjoy rural life in its entirety. It also reacted to political decision-making processes that were often concerned with the big picture: bolstering the economy by encouraging tourism and construction, while losing sight of the smaller picture: rural culture, the natural environment and the role of farmers in both. As co-ops responded to these external stimuli, they re-created themselves. At Mġarr, the co-op that was originally created on the prototype provided by Oscar Paris to organise the wholesaling of agricultural produce, re-invented itself as a customer-controlled co-op running an agricultural supplies shop and also as an advocacy group in times of financial and operational turmoil for Maltese farmers. At Manikata, the collective changed from an exclusively advocacy group into a community-

owned enterprise that ran endogenous development projects. In the process of metamorphosis, learning and growth was occurring at both the individual level as was attested above, but also at the collective level given that individuals contributed to the generation of change within both groups in order to make them relevant, responsive and creatively propositional structures.

This process of learning in the co-op was thus coupled with the process of creating knowledge. Individuals in their capacity as members of a co-op managed to re-create a collective entity in order to respond to real needs at grassroots level. At Mġarr capable individuals, both committee members and employees, set in motion a process of trust building that resulted in a successful business venture that is fully controlled by the consumer-members of the co-op and which is a very unique example in the Maltese islands. In the agricultural sector there are a couple of examples of consumer-controlled co-op stores set up specifically to respond to a community's needs. The initial spark of co-operation in Malta had taken off in the form of consumer co-operation in the town of Senglea, in the Great Harbour, towards the end of the nineteenth century. It eventually died out, but agricultural co-operatives have been able to revive the consumer-co-operative model, and the Mġarr community has learned how to make it work for the community. Unfortunately this has not been replicated in other sectors of the economy yet. In Manikata the community created knowledge around the need to run endogenous development projects that would safeguard rather than destroy the tangible and intangible constituents of a community's environment, economy and culture. Its endeavours suggest that community-led, owned and managed projects can be an effective way of responding to a community's needs by focusing upon the intersection between learning processes at the individual and the collective level. As Georgakopoulos (2011) commented about activists involved in opposing the golf course,

> Through their opposition towards this issue they not only managed to voice their concerns regarding the area involved, but they also managed to bring about more awareness regarding the importance of our environment. They promoted the fact that the environment belongs to all of us and therefore we all have a responsibility to contribute towards its protection and conservation (Georgakopoulos, 2011, p.56).

As one interviewee from Manikata said, it was about proposing a different way of attracting tourists that did not wreak havoc with the environment, that is, investing in community-owned projects that promoted rural tourism, an option that did not involve foreign direct investment or the luring of rich, golf-playing tourists, but rather the enticing of tourists who would rather appreciate getting to know and experience a different way of life. As Wikinson and Pickett (2010) argue, a sustainable economy is not based on spurring unlimited economic growth but safeguarding the quality of life that "is measured by health, happiness, friendship and community life, which really matters" (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2010, p.231).

8.3   Learning *from* the co-op

What did different people learn from the co-op?   In the case of the Mġarr co-op interviewees were of the opinion that customers learned information about the supplies they bought from the shop. Committee members learned how to use the spoken and the written word, mainly for advocacy purposes. According to an employee, farmer-members of the co-op learned how to behave and act in socially acceptable norms, not for the sake of following social norms but for the sake of making other people respect them as farmers. This in itself was considered by the co-op manager as a way of challenging widely-held perceptions about farmers as rough, unschooled, ill-mannered people, a perception which did not do justice to them as persons with dignity. Farmers at Mġarr also learned about new legislation, about the safe use of chemicals, about new cultivation techniques (especially strawberry cultivation) and about EU funding opportunities. The Manikata interviewees suggested that civil society organisations had been beneficiaries of knowledge about the farmers' contribution in safeguarding the environment and about the importance of safeguarding rural life and culture. Farmers and the local community who attended courses organised by the co-op learned various skills such as food preservation, food handling, first aid, the cultivation of fruit trees and health and safety. Volunteers and visitors to community activities in Manikata had learned about local traditional cuisine. The co-op manager also argued that visitors to the Manikata Rural Heritage Trail had learned about the natural and historical environment of the place as well as about contemporary farming. Finally, in the opinion of the co-op store manager, the customers at the co-op store learned about the quality of local fresh produce.

How did all these people learn these things from the co-op? Who taught them? At Mġarr, the co-op employees were a major source of learning. They provided information to customers over the counter. They also enabled the committee to prepare themselves well for meetings with the authorities or to write advocacy correspondence. They also organised information visits for farmers in fairs and farms in Italy. Employees and committee members also organised training courses and information seminars for the Mġarr farming community in the co-op offices. Various experts from the Department of Agriculture, experts from foreign strawberry suppliers, other foreign visiting experts, or the co-op employees themselves, provided the training. Manikata interviewees mentioned how sometimes they too attended courses and seminars held at the Mġarr co-op offices. At Manikata interviewees argued that civil society organisations must have learned a lot from meetings with the Committee for the Safeguard of Rural Life at Għajn Tuffieħa, from the Committee's participation in protest marches organised by environmental NGOs and also from the media campaign carried out by the Committee that preceded the co-operative. As in Mġarr, farmers and members of the local community had learned different skills and acquired useful knowledge by attending courses organised by the co-op at its offices or at the local parish hall. Various experts were hired by the co-op to give these courses. Volunteers in co-op community activities mentioned how they learned from each other while participating in preparations for community activities, and during the activities themselves, mentioning particularly the annual Pumpkin Feast. In these preparations women played a special role particularly related to food preparation. This contrasts with the Mġarr co-op that is not officially involved in any community activities held in the village. Manikata interviewees were of the opinion that visitors to the Heritage Trail learn from the employees whose job is to host Maltese and foreign visitors as well as students of different ages. They argued that visitors learn mostly by listening to the employees but also by experiencing the rural environment in person, walking amid the scenery. The store manager also contended that customers at the co-op's fruit and vegetable store learn while speaking with the salesperson at the store or with the occasional farmer who steps in to replenish supplies.

Why would different people want to learn from the co-op? In the case of Mġarr, customers at the shop would want to know how to use agricultural supplies properly. Similarly, customers at the Manikata store would want to know about the quality of the products they buy. The committee members at Mġarr would want to learn how to use

the spoken and written word effectively because they were intent upon doing effective advocacy work. Similarly, judging from the words of the Manikata interviewees who had founded the first action committee, civil society organisations wanted to learn about the views of the Manikata farmers and residents with regards to the golf course and by-pass because they wanted to lead a well-informed and effective campaign. With regards to courses organised by the Mġarr co-operative, attendees had every personal interest to take part, in order to keep themselves informed about new policies, about the latest strawberry cultivation techniques, or about opportunities to access European funding for investments in their farms. In Manikata, courses were also organised to fill knowledge gaps identified by the members of the co-op, particularly the farmers. However, at other times courses were organised also because the co-op as an organisation stood to gain. For example, it organised courses in the preparation of food preserves so that members could start producing good quality products to be sold initially on the Heritage Trail and later at the co-op Sunday store. The thousands of annual visitors to the Rural Heritage Trail seem to corroborate the opinion of interviewees who contend that there is an increasing yearning to know about rural life, especially from people living in Malta's expanding urban sprawl whose contact with nature is becoming always rarer. Being able to savour local cuisine, from simple fresh bread with tomato paste, to freshly picked strawberries to more elaborate pumpkin pies, is an essential part of this learning experience. Finally, volunteers at Manikata argued that participating in the organisation of community activities was not only an occasion for mutual learning but also a way to get out of the home and socialise in purposeful activities.

In 2.2 above I have argued that one of the characteristics of community is the sense of proximity to people's lives. The co-operative structures at both Mġarr and Manikata have enabled the local community to benefit from non-formal learning opportunities that were close to it at least in two ways. They were spatially close to the target audience. Mġarr interviewees mentioned how courses organised centrally by the Agriculture authorities were very often held in relatively distant localities and at very inconvenient times. This was echoed by a Manikata interviewee who argued that the success of the courses organised by the Manikata co-op was partly because they were held right in the community. Mġarr interviewees mentioned how the time of the courses or seminars held in the co-op offices was also very convenient, usually late in the evening. The sense of proximity of the co-op as a learning community to people's

lives was also evident in the relevance of the themes and issues covered during the training courses and seminars. At both villages the training courses were relevant to participants, particularly local farmers and producers of typical local food. In the case of Manikata they were also relevant to the development of the co-op's enterprise, based on what was really needed by the co-op to develop its projects. Co-operation was thus an effective vehicle to provide community members with training opportunities in areas that interested them at the individual level. In Manikata it went beyond this and the co-op was the catalyst for the holding of non-formal training opportunities that fitted in wider processes of community development.

In Chapter 2.6 above I also explored the notion of co-operative communities in terms of their potential contribution to social justice. Particularly in the case of Manikata, the Committee that preceded the co-operative was set up out of a group of people's sense of indignation at the fact that people in authority felt powerful enough to decide behind closed doors that a good number of farmers should be evicted from their fields and that a whole way of life should be swept away because they did not fit in with a particular paradigm for economic development. Their decision to fight together was an attestation to the fact that while they were fighting for their own personal gain they were also defending each other's right to a living and to a particular way of life. It was an attestation also to the belief that development projects should have the common good as their ultimate goal and that the common people should have a chance at having their say in establishing what the common good really is. Judging from what the Manikata interviewees said, (but also from what Georgakopoulos (2011, p.19, 56) found out in her research in which she interviewed three representatives from as many NGOs who had opposed the golf course), sharing this struggle with civil society organisations, particularly environment NGOs, as well as with the general public through the media, was not only a way of winning over consensus around their view point. It was also a way of sharing their knowledge, opinions, world views, feelings and attitudes with the wider public, a way of permitting strangers into their world, opening up participative pedagogic spaces where the struggle for social justice could take place. The setting up of the co-operative and of the Manikata Rural Heritage Trail was a way of extending this process beyond the settlement of the two environmental issues. In a narrower sense, the advocacy work carried out by the Mġarr co-op was a way of making the authorities aware of the farmers' viewpoints, opinions and feelings about the decisions being taken by policy makers in Valletta and in Brussels and that were

impinging upon the individual farmer's business. Indeed, not interviewing politicians about this is one of the limits of this research. In the Manikata case the struggle for social justice enabled the wider public to learn from the co-op. In the case of Mġarr it was the authorities who were arguably learning from it. If both co-ops managed to co-operate between them, the community of co-operators would learn how to reach out to a wider audience and the fight for social justice would ripple out into wider circles. Co-operation could indeed open up 'claimed spaces' at places close to grassroots communities where struggles for social justice could be made, not by putting up fences but by building bridges, creating opportunities for learning and growth.

8.4   Learning *for* the co-op

What have activists from both case studies learned for the co-op? What knowledge did they create about co-operation as a political tool that enables them to envision and create alternative communities, where they can exert more control over their individual and collective lives? At Mġarr interviewees showed how co-operation was useful for them in facing adversities they were encountering as a 'community of practice', as farmers. They found that by using the co-op's structures they could make their voice heard with the authorities with regards to the EU's neo-liberal ideology of competition across borders that overrides the quest for social justice. Mġarr activists and employees have also learned that the co-op could create spaces for the participation of a diversity of people. These spaces made it possible for persons with different competences to contribute to a community-owned and led enterprise in a way that the success of the collective project depended on the opening up of spaces for participation of local people, either as committee members or as employees. In the case of Manikata, the community activities organised by the co-op opened up spaces also for ordinary members of the co-op and for other volunteers from the community. The participants from Mġarr also showed how co-operation could enable local communities to overcome gender biases, opening up spaces for female participation in male-dominated structures. They also learned that co-operation has the potential for seeking consensus over issues of local or national importance and that this could be done by widening the dialogical process to other community-based co-ops like theirs. This was also shown at Manikata were the initial Committee for the Safeguard of Rural Life at Għajn Tuffieħa used its grassroots organisational structure to seek consensus over the golf course and the by-pass issues that were considered by the local activists to be of

both local and national importance. Their networking activities at national level, particularly with environmental NGOs, enabled them to reach their goals. At Manikata activists also showed that co-operation could be employed as a political tool to safeguard tenant farmers' rights over their fields, which is basically their right to work and earn a living. As in Mġarr, the Manikata interviewees showed how they found the co-operative structure useful to set up community-owned enterprises that address the needs of the community, that are financially viable and sustainable, and that build financial sustainability on co-operation rather than competition at the local level. Finally, at Manikata, participants in the research have shown that the co-operative was helping them to change civil society's perception about farmers, their work, their contribution to people's lives, their contribution to the environment and to the economy. This was enabling people to shed perceptions about farmers that were rooted in folkloristic, romanticised, water-colour depictions of farmers riding horse-driven carts or milking goats in the middle of the street. Or else, the more cynical ones, rooted in visions of cheating farmers who, as some pro-golf course people argued in letters to the newspapers, had no business opposing the golf course because they did not pay any taxes and lived off state-owned land.

How did the participants learn these things? How did they manage to create this knowledge about the benefits of co-operation to community life? At Mġarr farmers learned to look up to the co-op to act on their behalf and voice their concerns with the authorities. They have also elected representatives to the committee who, although not very well versed in official discourse, were quite outspoken and ready to learn how to use the word in order to influence the world and change it for the better in terms of equity, claiming and creating spaces where they could influence and challenge political decisions at local and national level that had a bearing on their work and life; as Freire (1990) argued, "while to say the true word – which is work, which is praxis, is to transform the world, saying that word is not the privilege of some few men, but the right of every man" (Freire, 1990, p.61). And this was working out for them.

The building of trust was also crucial to make co-operation work. At Mġarr spaces were created by means of the co-op where farmers who were mainly knowledgeable about agriculture co-operated with employees who had a good grasp over managerial, financial and technical matters. But for these spaces to create a dynamic symbiosis, where individuals with different abilities could contribute to a collective enterprise and create a strong alternative to dominant ideologies of

government, participants had to learn how to trust one another and to shed cynicism and suspicion. This learning curve at Mġarr could be seen in the way the all-male committee slowly built trust in their capable female administrator, overcoming prejudices and pre-conceptions about women's place in society. All interviewed Mġarr male farmers said they could not achieve their success on their farms without the help of their wives, but found it hard to believe that the same could happen with regards to the management of their co-op's business, finances, training and advocacy work, all of them areas in which Rose played a crucial role.

Participants from Mġarr and Manikata also learned about the possibilities which the co-operative model opens up for the building of consensus within civil society around issues that concern them and their communities, in their quest to create an alternative, sometimes oppositional discourse that needs to go against the grain of dominant discourses that are more readily acknowledged and legitimated. At Mġarr the committee tried but failed to seek consensus over issues that concerned Maltese farmers and could understand that going it alone was making it more difficult for them to convince government on certain issues. They were basing the legitimacy of their arguments on the strength of their membership base at Mġarr and probably also on the strength of the legitimacy they had acquired as the operators of a successful community-owned business that testified to their committed and meticulous way of doing things.

At Manikata, activists had a more positive experience of networking and building consensus by looking out of the boundaries of their community. The forerunner of the co-op, the Committee for the Safeguard of Rural Life at Għajn Tuffieħa had initially intended to carry out its fight to stop the golf course and the by-pass by taking Government to court; it even hired a lawyer and started proceedings in court. However, activists quickly realised that the way forward was not at the law tribunal but by winning the consensus of public opinion, helping to build a strong, oppositional voice within civil society. This could only be done by co-operating with environmental NGOs, inviting them over to Manikata and by participating in protest marches which the NGOs organised. This was also done by empowering single members of the Committee to write letters to the newspapers, letters that would be previously discussed at the meetings of the Committee to make sure that arguments were laid out clearly and forcefully. This collaboration had enabled the hamlet's community to secure the farmers' rights over their tenanted lands. The setting up of the co-op was also seen

by the farmers as a kind of farmers' union that would enable them to protect their rights for the future.

When the co-op was eventually set up, the management committee of the co-op continued to seek allies outside of the co-op, following the sixth ICA co-operation principle of co-operation among co-operatives. It did this by securing membership of *Koperattivi Malta* and benefitting from funding schemes of the Federation such as the start-up grant, funds for setting up a website and funds for the organisation of training courses. It also bought services from other co-ops such as the setting up of the website and a Facebook page (Media co-op), publicity campaigns related to the annual pumpkin feast (Media co-op), the printing of information panels for the Rural Heritage Trail (Outlook co-op), or purchasing irrigation supplies (Mġarr Farmers co-op). In return, co-ops helped back. For example, Vista co-op, that runs child-care centres and kindergartens, supported the setting up of the heritage trail by regularly sending student groups on educational visits.

Being a co-op had thus enabled the local activists of Manikata to build upon their learning of building bridges and stimulating personal and collective growth through the increase of social contacts beyond the peripheries of the group and of the hamlet. The co-op model opened up spaces for collaboration, mutual learning and mutual help not only within the collective of activists but also beyond the confines of the collective. With regards to enabling the general public to change its perceptions about farmers, the Manikata interviewees had learned the co-op's potential in this regard by running the Rural Heritage Trail which was enabling visitors to understand the farmers' contribution to the economy, showing how protecting the rural and the natural environment was vital in the longer term for the country's economy. The co-op opened up this dialogical process with visitors because the notion of economy is a politically and ideologically contested term and the co-op structure was making it possible for local farmers to contribute to the discussion by inviting people to come over and see what they can actually contribute to the general wellbeing of society. Finally the Manikata activists had shown that the co-op model was ideal to set up community-owned and led enterprises by setting up their own business projects, mainly the co-op store and the Manikata Rural Heritage Trail. Farmers created this knowledge by making adjustments in their family-owned farms' operations so that they would fit in with the co-op's enterprises. One particular farmer sows particular crops along his fields on the heritage trail that would be of interest to visitors, others would

make sure that their fields and greenhouses are well kept in order to be able to host students and visitors. Others would make sure that they have certain crops readily available to be harvested in time for the annual pumpkin feast.

Why would co-operators from Mġarr and Manikata want to make the case for co-operation? At Mġarr farmers had faith in the co-op as a legitimate and representative structure that was committed towards their growth and wellbeing. It acted as their consolidated voice with the authorities, and helped them to stay abreast of technological developments in crop production. They were also ready to vouch for co-operation because they thought that the co-op was a democratic structure, a participative space created by them where community members who were committed to the common good could give their contribution. The Mġarr male members of the committee were ready to open up spaces for the participation of women because the female administrator they had hired was actually proving her mettle and they were willing to change their views about the different ways women could contribute to family, farm and co-operative life. Finally, with regards to seeking consensus over issues concerning farming at the national level among other farmers' co-ops, the Mġarr interviewees believed that if they could summon the authorities to listen to what they had to say, they knew that they could surely carry more weight and obtain acknowledgement as an alternative and at times oppositional voice if the other co-ops within the FCCS farmers' co-operative network were ready to enter into dialogical processes within FCCS and speak out. For their part the Manikata interviewees were able to make the case for co-operation with regards to the issue of the building of wide consensus over issues of local and national importance because they had actually seen it work; participating in wider networks had enabled them to turn the tables and convince government that everybody stood to lose if its projects for the Manikata and Għajn Tuffieħa area went ahead. When the co-op replaced the committee, collaboration outside the confines of the co-op had also enabled the group to start getting on its feet and keep on working towards its aims by setting up its own community-owned and led enterprises. More specifically, the Manikata interviewees believed in co-operation because it had managed to safeguard their rights over their tenanted fields. They also believed that co-operation was enabling them to keep making the point that farmers' fields were worth protecting. And this 'war of position' was needed to be waged in civil society in order to make pressure on the authorities and their dominant discourse of economic development. Co-operation was enabling Manikata farmers to help the

general public understand that the protection of fields was also a question of social justice because the fields are not open spaces waiting to be developed, but rather the farmers' shop floor and factory and the place where the family creates its own living. Co-operation was working out because it was making it possible for the farmers to create initiatives together to carry on the ideological struggle. Winning the golf course and by-pass issues did not, in any way mean that the struggle was over. Ensuring the success of its own community-based projects was a crucial part of the struggle for the legitimacy of their oppositional voice in the face of dominant discourses around the economy and farming's role in it.

Where does all this leave us with regards to the contribution that co-operation could make to a different, more democratic and equitable society? The case studies have shown that co-operation can create representative voices for sectorial and local communities that, even if they are at the remotest places on earth, feel the negative effects of global capitalism and neo-liberal policies. Co-operation can enable sectorial or local communities to claim spaces at local, national and international level to engage with visible and hidden powers. Particularly, co-operation has the ability to open up spaces at local level where communities can thrive upon the interconnection between individual and collective learning and growth. The more spaces are opened internally for individuals to interact and participate freely in collective endeavours, thus stimulating individual growth, the more the collective is able to engage with visible and hidden powers at local, national and global levels, stimulating its collective growth. In this regard, the co-operative model becomes a historically defined organisational mechanism that, as Illich (1979) argued about scientific discoveries, "enlarges the range of each person's competence, control, and initiative, limited only by other individuals' claims to an equal range of power and freedom" (Illich, 1979, p.12). Co-operation can facilitate the building of inclusive local structures that would overcome prejudices and pre-conceptions about what certain categories of people are supposedly able or unable to do. Co-operation can help deconstruct collective frames of mind that hinder inclusion and prohibit certain categories of individuals from securing their own growth and defining their own identities by contributing to the common good in communal endeavours. This is possible because true co-operation is built on mutuality and solidarity over concrete issues of individual and collective concern, with a view to secure an equitable access to basic rights. As Jane Thompson (2000) argues about community organisations and social movements, "Their political potential comes from

the creation of subversive space for participation and dialogue in relation to issues with which they are concerned" (Thompson, 2000, p.62).

In *Marxism and Literature* Raymond Williams (1977) argues that anything that does not form part of dominant fixed forms, structures, or systems of beliefs and values,

> is not silence: not the absence, the unconscious, which bourgeois culture has mythicized. It is a kind of feeling and thinking which is indeed social and material, but each in an embryonic phase before it can become fully articulate and defined exchange (Williams, 1977, p.131).

It is what he termed 'structures of feeling'. Both co-operatives in this research have shown themselves to be two collectives in search of acknowledgement for their dissonant voices, structures of feeling seeking recognition and legitimacy within civil society and in the corridors of power. They pursued this on their own (as was the case with Mġarr), or by seeking consensus beyond their organisational boundaries as was the case with Manikata. Possibly, a network of co-operative communities can engage with powerful authorities at local, national and international places, turning the personal into the political and the local into global. That these possibilities do not always materialise is because of different factors. At Mġarr the co-op sought networking within the FCCS umbrella but failed possibly because of lack of trust between the different farmers' co-ops. At Manikata, the activists sought different ways how to network and build consensus. But the fact that the co-op was run by part-timers who were struggling to put the co-op's business enterprise on its feet, put constraints on their possibilities. But it was evident that connecting to the social world was considered as the way forward by the interviewees. These connections to the wider world are in themselves educative. Co-operatives thus have the possibility of becoming democratic learning spaces that, as Dewey (1997) envisaged, would be characterised by two founding principles of educative social life; they would be spaces were "there are many interests consciously communicated and shared; and there are varied and free points of contact with other modes of association" (Dewey, 1997, p.83). In the case of Mġarr these other forms of association come with contacts with and within FCCS, limited or controversial as these may be, contacts with the political authorities, contacts with *Koperattivi Malta* or with Copa-Cogeca. In the case of Manikata these contacts with other forms of association come at the collective level's contacts with *Koperattivi Malta*, other co-ops from whom the co-op buys its services, as well as with visitors to the Rural Heritage Trail who come from such institutions as schools, local

and foreign universities, and a variety of Maltese NGOs. At the individual level, particularly at Manikata, these contacts come from every activist's involvement in his or her professional or occupational capacity in different economic sectors and that consciously feed into the co-op's operations and capacity building.

Particularly in the case of Manikata, the case study has shown that the initial committee had been able to put local issues on the national agenda. The initial spark was a seemingly local issue; it concerned farmers' tenancies and a hamlet's way of life. But it became a national issue because government's projects stemmed from a paradigm of economic development that ignored grassroots' opinions, choices, and views about their own wellbeing according to their own values. It was thus a struggle for a kind of political freedom that as Sen argues, "lies precisely in the opportunity it gives citizens to discuss and debate – and to participate in the selection of – values in the choice of priorities" (Sen, 2001, p.30). The fact that the community came together to face the problem and put up a struggle meant that not only the personal can become political, but that the local can become national and also global. In fact the Committee that represented the hamlet's community initially sought and found allies in the European Parliament, particularly on the grounds that some farmers that were going to be evicted had received European Rural Funds to upgrade their fields. The setting up of the co-op meant that the community could carry on the ideological struggle on what it means to participate in political life, even if one is a farmer and thus associated with preconceptions about an inward looking suspicious rural society. But the co-op provided the means not only to express an opinion on what local development should look like, on who should decide about local development, or in whose favour local development should work. The co-op provided a local community with the vital means to propose its own development projects, own them and implement them according to its own values and priorities. Co-operation and networking between co-ops and other local organisational structures can provide communities with enough clout to set up community-controlled and democratically-managed enterprises that help communities to stand up to the effects of global capitalism on their lives, creating also alternative modes of collective production, consumption, and more generally, collective living and growth.

For all this to happen, individual community members will have to enter into a dialogical process with the collective, and this entails exposing one's own ways of life, one's values, one's priorities. In the case of Mġarr the co-op members were clearly not

ready to surrender in any way their individual control over family farms. Interviewees made it clear that the co-op had no business in influencing in any way a farmer's decisions about his or her own farm. There were clear boundaries that the co-op could not overstep. Thus, the co-op was expected to act as the farmers' voice in the face of national and European policy makers who were not always ready to take the farmers' views into account when making important political decisions that affected agriculture. The co-op was also expected to provide farmers with supplies, teach them new cultivation techniques and offer them any other important training that would enable them to be successful farmers. But then, at the market, every farmer was his or her own master. There were areas where Mġarr farmers saw that co-operation could make a vital difference and were eager to oppose a policy of competition with an alternative discourse of co-operation. But there were other areas in which they thought they still had to go it alone and protect their patch of grass on their own individual terms. This obviously put a limit to what the co-op could do for them. In Manikata, farmers had made a step further by making certain changes to the way they managed their farms so that, for example, the fields along the Rural Heritage Trail would be cultivated in a way that would make the trail enterprise a successful one. However, even though there was a general feeling about the need to secure the sustainability of agriculture in the long term, particularly the need to convert from conventional to organic production, only one farmer took the bold step. The need was felt but farmers saw that such a conversion would render their farms non-profitable. Some members of the committee thought that more awareness-raising was needed among farmers to do the courageous shift. But maybe this is the next big thing the co-op could do in a local community: educate for sustainability.

8.5   Conclusion

Both case studies have shown how members of the management committees learned *in* the co-op, acquiring skills at individual and collective level. Primarily they learned the art of dialogue, of inclusion, of setting up and managing community-owned enterprises. They learned these skills by involving themselves in discussions, meetings, in the daily chores of running a community-based organisation, learning from their own experience and from the experience of others around them. Learning *in* the co-op was motivated by individuals' will to learn and to contribute to the common good, as well as by the collective desire to be an effective organisational tool for the benefit of the community.

Working *in* the co-op enabled employees to learn an array of skills as they carried out various jobs. Their learning was motivated by their desire to provide a good service to clients, and to ensure the co-op's enterprises were financially successful. They were also motivated by an innate desire to learn new things.

Learning *in* the co-op is also a process of forging identities as individuals sway between private and public spheres. Learning was related to a shared awareness of the aims of the co-op. It was also related to the co-op's ability to respond to both internal and external stimuli. It was related to a community's ability to create knowledge about the best way to respond to the community's needs by harnessing individual learning abilities and a shared, collective, sense of agency.

People from within and outside both case studies have also learned *from* the co-op. These included individuals such as members, customers and volunteers, and collectives such as environmental NGOs. Employees were a central source and promoters of learning processes, for people inside the co-op, including the management and the membership base, as well as for persons outside the co-op, given that employees operated at the interconnecting junction between the co-op and the wider community. The proximity of the co-op to the local community made it a vehicle for learning at community level, even when providing non-formal training opportunities. *From* the co-op, local communities have fundamentally learned how to struggle for social justice by building solidarity networks that would enable them to scale up their actions from the local to the national and global level.

Participants in the research also showed they had learned *for* the co-op, making the case for its possibilities for action. They showed how co-operation creates and provides grassroots and local communities that have been ignored by the authorities and by decision makers at local and national level with created or claimed, sometimes invited, spaces for making their voice heard. Co-operation opened spaces for collaboration where voices could be created, heard and shared, values challenged, mentalities changed, consensus sought within and beyond boundaries, and action taken, in the quest for equity and for greater freedom to participate in the determination of individual and collective futures. Co-operation enabled local communities to create or claim spaces for voicing their views, even their anger and disdain, and for challenging political decisions taken on their behalf or behind their backs. Co-operation could bank upon trusting relationships, sustain them, and develop

structures where a sense of agency can be harnessed and fostered to develop into community action. The latter could include the setting up of community-owned and run enterprises that are based on an alternative paradigm of economic development. Co-operation could also help to seek consensus within civil society around those alternative paradigms, in the face of dominant discourses that are more in tune with neo-liberal paradigms. While the latter tend to be exclusive, thriving on cut-throat competition, co-operation thrives on a bottom-up, capacity-building, networking approach to development. Co-operation between co-operatives and NGOs is essential for this approach to be effective and to achieve acknowledgement and legitimacy.

But for this to happen, individuals within the community should be ready to put themselves, their values, beliefs, lifestyles and work practices into question. Getting into this dialogical process focused on personal and collective growth is about moving out of comfort zones and getting ready to give as much as to get, to lose as much as to gain.

Chapter 9

Conclusion

9.1 Introduction

In this research project I was interested to see how activists within the Maltese co-operative movement learn and grow through their co-operation and to see how the co-operative movement could contribute to the learning and growth in the wider community in its yearning for a more socially just and equitable society. In 1.2 above I made it clear at the outset that the kind of learning I was interested in was social learning, the learning that occurs when people get together to share concerns, to discuss and to act together, to follow common aims, to address shared needs, to reach common goals. Here I was guided mainly by Griff Foley (2004), and Etienne Wenger (1998).

It was also a kind of learning that is guided by certain values, which I explored in Chapter 2. I was interested in learning that occurs in communities. Here I used the word 'community' interchangeably to mean a local community, the farming community, and the co-operative community. Particularly with reference to the co-operative as a community, I explored the voluntaristic nature of the organisation, with particular reference to John Dewey's own interpretation of learning as a phenomenon of social control but also of liberation of individual and collective powers (Dewey, 1997, p.87). Making reference to a number of authors I explored the possibilities of communities as creative spaces where people open up democratic spaces for each other in a way that individuals find in their coming together the empowerment to engage with larger and higher powers that have a bearing upon their lives. Here, I found John Gaventa's power-cube metaphor (Gaventa, 2005, p.11) quite useful as an analytical tool to explore how communities, particularly co-operatives, are able to open up spaces at the local and national level to engage with different forms of power, especially national and federal

forms of government. Paulo Freire and Amartya Sen have been particularly useful to probe further the notion of collective citizen engagement. Freire's notion of praxis (1990, p.60) and Sen's capability approach (Sen, 2001, p.75) both veer towards situations where people are aware of their entitlement to live free lives, to determine their own future, and to be part of the making up of that future, bearing the responsibility for working towards it. According to Lorenzo Milani (Milani et al., no date, p.34) this collective grassroots process gives an authentic meaning to politics. Finally I explored the wider political process whereby the collective actions of the community become the expression of an ideology or paradigm that very often finds itself at odds with dominant ideologies of power. Dominant forms of power have well-developed and explicit ideologies to sustain their actions. On the other hand, communities become creative laboratories where shared feelings that are alternative or oppositional to dominant ideologies, what Williams calls 'structures of feeling', take shape and find a concrete expression in community action. Structures of feeling consolidate themselves as communities seek consensus in what Antonio Gramsci would call 'a war of position' within civil society, creating or claiming spaces at local and national level where hegemonic discourses are contested.

In Chapter 3 I discussed the development of co-operation as a community-based oppositional and alternative mode of social, political and economic organisation in the face of ruthless industrial capitalism in Britain. I discussed the benevolent actions of two father figures of the co-operative movement, Robert Owen and William King, who provided the ideological basis for co-operation. Having both failed at providing successful working models, the breakthrough took place at Rochdale in 1844. On the 21 December of that year, the Rochdale Pioneers co-operative society opened its shop (Rhodes, 2012, p.26). The co-op had managed to establish a set of principles that made the co-operative an ideological but also a commercial success. I then discussed how the model developed at Rochdale grew into a nation-wide movement of consumer co-operation that at the ideological level swayed from an oppositional or alternative stance to capitalism, to a compromising relationship with capitalist structures. Capitalism is not a perennial fixed form and metamorphoses itself in order to protect its hegemony. This has had an effect on the way consumer co-operation has developed in Britain. At the grassroots level the movement is still very engaged in responding to the needs of communities. At the central level the need to ensure an operational and financial structure that is strong enough to compete on the high street has led the

movement to make compromises with the basic principles of democracy and representation. More than once this led to an imminent dissolution of the whole structure, particularly of the Co-operative Group based at 1 Angel Square, Manchester.

In the following chapter I discussed how the imperial authorities appropriated themselves of the co-operative model and used it as an alternative model for organising economic development in the colonies in Asia, Africa and the Mediterranean. Rita Rhodes (2012, p.71) contends that his has enabled co-operation as an ideology to reach the four corners of the world, providing a positive side to British imperialism. But Godfrey Baldacchino (1994) and Johnston Birchall (1997) argued that the Indian co-operative model, developed in the beginning of the nineteenth century, was exported to other parts of the empire not to disrupt the development of global capitalism but rather to connect local communities to it in order to sustain it (Baldacchino, 1994, p.509 and Birchall, 1997, p.133). Indeed, after an attempt at establishing consumer co-ops in Malta, an attempt that is largely unresearched and unrecorded, co-ops were introduced in Malta in the immediate post-war period, not to bring about any change in production patterns but rather to organise and regularise the wholesaling of agricultural products. The introduction did not bring any real change in agricultural production patterns where individualism still reigns supreme. For years, co-operation did not make any inroads into Maltese society. For well up to the end of the twentieth century co-operation was mainly associated with wholesaling in agriculture and fisheries, without any real commitment to a co-operative ideology. It was only very recently that co-operation was adopted in other sectors of the economy with the setting up of very enterprising workers' co-ops. These brought a change in the way traditional and contemporary co-operators defined co-operation, both politically and operationally. This led to a schism in the Maltese co-operative movement which is today represented by two federations with no sign of pacification yet in sight. This has naturally weakened the movement's credibility with the authorities and with civil society.

In Chapter 5 I outlined the way I went about doing the research. The project was based on two case studies. One was a farmers' co-op set up in the immediate post-war period on the initiative of the British authorities. The other was set up on the initiative of a group of farmers and residents who, after a two-year campaign against the building of a golf course and a by-pass in their village, set up a co-op to carry on their struggle and to find ways how to give shape and substance to their views about a more equitable way of life. I was not a total outsider to the case studies. As I discuss in

Chapter 5 I was playing the dual role of researcher and activist since I was a founder member of the second co-op. As an activist I carried out the research from a committed point of view and never pretended to be sitting on the fence. As a researcher I found in reflexivity a way how to acquire the necessary critical distance in order to be able to carry out the research in the most sober of ways, asking probing and challenging questions and analysing data in the light of the theoretical framework laid out in Chapter 2. In the end, I found that being both an activist and researcher, and considering interviewees as participating subjects rather than analysable objects, enabled the participants and myself to turn this research into a reflective learning process for all involved.

9.2   Answering the research questions: what did participants learn in, from and for the co-op?

In my twenty individual interviews and two group discussions I aimed to get answers to three guiding questions:

1. What do people learn *in* the co-op? That is, what do people learn while participating in the running of the co-op, as elected members of the management committee, as employees or as volunteers?

2. What do people learn *from* the co-op? That is, what do active and inactive members, customers, the local community, or policy makers learn from the co-ops' activities?

3. What do people learn *for* the co-op? That is, how do participants in both co-ops learn how to turn co-operation into a political tool that enables them to envision and create alternative communities where they can exert more control over their individual and collective lives?

Chapters 6 and 7 give an overview of the participants from both case studies that range from members of the management committee, employees, ordinary members and volunteers. All the interviewees from the Mġarr co-op had left school as early as they could, without any formal qualifications, except for two employees. Interviewees were all full-time farmers except for two full-time employees at the co-op and one part-time employee who had a full-time job at the Department of Agriculture. At Manikata all the interviewees had different full-time jobs except for one interviewee whose only occupation was her part-time job at the co-op. They also had mixed educational,

occupational and professional backgrounds, making the co-op a more diverse community, with the strengths and challenges that diversity brings with it. Trust, especially in the Mġarr case, and the belief that everybody had something to contribute to a collective endeavour, especially in the Manikata case, were crucial to make both co-ops a success.

Set up initially as a producers' co-op to organise agricultural wholesaling, the Mġarr co-op was re-appropriated by the membership and turned into a consumer co-op running its own agricultural supplies shop, and into an advocacy group. The Manikata co-op had started off as a farmers' and residents' pressure group and turned into a community-based co-op aimed at managing community-owned and managed development projects.

What do people learn *in* a co-op? The case studies have shown that people learn how to turn the personal into the political. They develop personal identities in their search for meaning as they orbit between their private and communal lives. They learn to participate in the process of praxis where aims are shared and there is a shared awareness of what brings participants together. In the process participants learn to shoulder the responsibility to contribute towards the common good. They are also aware that their participation in the process of action and reflection is a learning process at individual and collective level. They learn to respond to stimuli that are both within and outside the co-op, turning the co-op into a creatively responsive space. This manifests itself in the way the co-ops created community-owned and managed enterprises that addressed the needs of the same community. They also learned how to seek consensus around alternative and oppositional discourses that developed within the co-op by seeking alliances beyond the confines of the co-op, for the purpose of affecting change at the local level but also at the national level, especially in the way political powers deal with local communities.

What do people learn *from* the co-op? Both case studies showed how they were able to organise non-formal education and training initiatives for the benefit of the local community about issues that concerned the co-operative or the local community. These non-formal learning activities were thus close to the local community in spatial terms but also in substance. Activists from both case studies carried advocacy work with the authorities. They struggled for consensus in civil society around their alternative discourses, their oppositional values, their beliefs about what development really

means and about whose voice really matters when it comes to deciding on matters that affect local communities. In this process they shared knowledge, opinions, world views, feelings and attitudes with the wider public and with the authorities, admitting strangers into their world, building bridges beyond the confines of the co-op, claiming or opening up participative pedagogic spaces where the struggle for social justice could take place, and where learning and growth could proliferate.

What did people learn *for* the co-op? The case studies have shown that co-ops can become a voice for local communities. They are able to create local participative and inclusive spaces, where prejudices are overcome and pre-conceptions deconstructed. They are able to create empowering spaces where communities bank upon individual abilities that, when involved in internal dialogical processes, can foster processes of individual and collective growth, enabling the co-operative community to promote equity and social justice through an ideology of mutuality. Co-operatives have shown themselves to be able to give shape, substance and visibility to local structures of feeling, seeking acknowledgement and consensus by communicating them beyond the boundaries of the co-op. This process of communicating within and outside the co-op enabled the co-ops to develop their potential for growth since, as Dewey had argued, a prerogative for growth is an increasing number of points of contact between the community and other organised forms of association. Co-operatives can help to scale up the struggle for legitimacy around structures of feeling as they develop into oppositional or alternative discourses. Dominant ideologies are concerned with neo-liberal paradigms of development based on tokenistic forms of participative spaces for domesticated voices. Co-ops can help to claim or create democratic participative spaces where everybody can voice his or her opinions, guided by his or her values, even when these run counter to dominant legitimated and acknowledged values.

Finally, co-operation can work in fostering growth at individual and collective level in as much as individuals and collectives are ready to put their values, beliefs and practices into question. Entering into dialogical processes, they should be ready to lower protective fences, build trusting relationships, be open to change, and be willing to make bold steps forward.

9.3   What did I learn from my role as activist-researcher?

In chapters 1 and 5 I wrote about my dual role as researcher and activist. In 2005, when the golf course and Manikata by-pass issues came up, I was one of the founder members of the Committee for the Safeguard of Rural Life at Għajn Tuffieħa. I was a thirty-five-year-old adult educator, working with parents in state schools and volunteering in the parish of Manikata. I was unwittingly getting into one of the greatest learning experiences in my life. The decision by the Malta Transport Authority to shelve the by-pass project on the 26th of October 2006, and the press conference by the Prime Minister on the 12th of May 2007 that announced the setting up of a Majjistral Nature and History Park instead of the proposed golf course, were important milestones in my life. It does not happen often that one realises that a two-year struggle which took up most of his time and energy has given the desired outcome. In the campaign I met farmers, residents, representatives of environmental NGOs, politicians, ministers, the leader of the opposition, the archbishop, Maltese and German members of the European Parliament, and many journalists. I had led committee meetings and enabled members of the committee to write letters and articles to the press and to address press conferences in the fields, in their effort to convince people that the government was wrong and that they were right. When the campaign had reached its aims, some of the farmers involved in the campaign told me that it would be a pity to simply break up. They were aware that the struggle had just started and not ended. Now we had to prove our claims that local communities had the right to propose, own and manage their own development projects according to their own priorities and values. It was then that I particularly got interested in the idea of setting up a co-operative in order to give shape to our dreams. On the 27th of August 2007 the co-op obtained recognition from the Co-operatives Board. I'm still very active on the management committee of *Koperattiva Rurali Manikata*. I also got very interested in the Maltese co-operative movement and I am the person who usually represents my co-op at the meetings organised by *Koperattivi Malta* and by the Central Co-operative Fund. From the setting up of the co-operative till May 2014 I was treasurer of the co-op and managed the co-op's finances, a great learning opportunity for one who could barely manage his own finances. During the annual general meeting held in that month I relinquished the post to a newcomer to the management committee who was more qualified than me to do the job. I have since then taken over the responsibility of managing a small farm at the *Razzett tal-Qasam*, a historical farmstead currently being restored by the co-op and a major attraction for visitors to the Manikata Rural Heritage

Trail. I do this on a voluntary basis and with much earnestness since it helps me to connect to my family's history and culture. It is also a great learning opportunity for my daughters who help me do the job.

In Chapter 5 I quoted Charles Hale (2006) who argues that "Activist research is the effort to externalise the knowledge produced during activism or direct participation" (Hale, 2006, p.99). This research was a reflective exercise for me and my colleagues, both those who had been involved with the group since the setting up of the Committee for the Safeguard of Rural Life at Għajn Tuffieħa in 2005 and also those who joined us along the way after the setting up of the co-operative in 2007. It helped us to take stock of what we had learned during our activism in the locality, to reflect upon our successes and our failures, upon the goals we reached, the goals we missed and the goals we would like to set ourselves for the future. Having had to read a lot about participation and community development, I could constantly relate what I was reading to my own experiences at Manikata. Similarly, while discussing issues with Manikata interviewees I could put our experiences in a wider global context of what activism and participation in community development means to different people and in different contexts. Like other people around the globe, we had issues to deal with at local community level. We dealt with them in our own peculiar way by setting up a co-operative, establishing goals and working towards reaching them, sometimes succeeding, sometimes failing. But like other communities around the world we worked together, establishing shared goals and working collectively towards achieving them. And like other communities' experiences, our participation in the process was a learning experience that enriched us at the individual and at the collective level. It was a milestone in our individual journey towards human fulfilment. It was also a milestone in the history of the development of the small rural community of the hamlet of Manikata.

Interviewing the Mġarr activists was also a very enriching experience. Being involved in the co-operative movement only since 2007, my knowledge of how co-operatives work was based mainly on readings and on what I had learned while representing my co-op at meetings of *Koperattivi Malta* and of the Central Co-operative Fund. Interviewing the Mġarr farmers and employees was like climbing over the fence into my neighbour's garden. Their openness to discuss pertinent issues, to provide me with information, to challenge my assumptions, to prove me wrong, to feel challenged by my questions and proposals, was a veritable experience of growth for me and, I

would also confidently say, for them. My interaction with the Mġarr community gave me the opportunity to get a good feel of the life and soul of a farmers' co-op. They had a different history, different origins, a different ethos, and different goals from us at the Manikata co-op. My encounter with them widened my vision of what a co-op is all about. I was impressed by their business acumen but most of all by their attitude towards the authorities. Their sense of empowerment and of entitlement was impressive. My encounter with the Mġarr interviewees proved to be also a moment of great frustration because they had achieved so much in the seventy years since their setting up that it was a real shame that they were struggling to convince youngsters not only to get into agriculture but also to renew the way farming was organised and practised. They seemed to struggle to convince the younger generation that with regards to production, change should not happen only at the technical level but also at the organisational level. Family farms as we know them might have to go through a drastic metamorphosis in order to survive and thrive. Having said this, as I am writing, I know that the Mġarr co-op store has had to migrate temporarily to the co-op meeting hall because major structural works are being done there. Their agricultural supplies retail business keeps expanding and needs more space to provide a better working space for the employees and to give a more welcoming service to customers. The co-op keeps being a standard bearer of the Maltese farmers' co-ops. And that gives hope.

Going over my research at this point, I would be tempted to extrapolate about what would life in the rural communities be like if government were to give its support to local initiatives in the same way it pledged support (then to retract upon it) to those who were going to manage the golf course resort in Manikata. The Mġarr co-op itself was the fruit of government initiative. The Manikata one was the result of direct community action. What if the two models were to be crossed? How would this impact upon local development? Community-based co-ops thrive upon the support they get from local activists who are ready to sacrifice time and energy to invest in local initiatives. They depend on the good will of local people who have initiative and a willingness to learn, and are empowered enough to have a go at giving a solid shape to their dreams. They are also the place where differing 'structures of feeling' consolidate themselves in the dialogical processes that keep local enterprises alive. Community-based co-ops are the place where people learn and grow as they search for solutions to their everyday needs, in the lively interplay between inclusive and exclusive initiatives. How would local realities change if government were to see in community-based co-

ops a credible and effective partner to foster initiatives for local development that do not start from the desk-top of policy makers but from the collective initiative of local activists? How would local 'structures of feeling' shape themselves into more 'dominant' forms in the face of all-powerful neo-liberal development paradigms which are at the base of a lot of EU policy making? How could this development receive the brokering support of the Maltese national authorities without falling into the danger of paralysing 'assistencialism' or dependency that characterised the development of agricultural co-operatives in Malta in the second half of the twentieth century? Perhaps the best way forward is for empowered co-ops themselves to suggest the best way how authorities can help them scale up their actions, while at the same time averting the dangers of co-optation.

My research was an occasion to place my activism, my co-operative and also the Maltese co-operative movement in a wider context of space, time and ideological development. The Maltese co-operative movement today is in dire straits given the present division between *Koperattivi Malta* and the new splinter federation, a blow that has brought the Central Co-operatives Fund to a stalemate. However, the research enabled me to put the development of the Maltese co-operative movement in a historical perspective, mainly the proliferation of the co-op model from its humble origins in Rochdale to the spread of the model across the British Empire. The research also enabled me to put my own co-operative experience in the context of a globalised movement, with its different ramifications, a global movement that has weathered the 2008 financial crisis and still provides hope of a better life for many local communities in many different parts of the world, fuelling in its own way the global quest for social justice. Finally the research enabled me to explore the ideological context of co-operation, both as a community development model and also as a vehicle for adult and community education. It enabled me to appreciate my contribution to the co-op as a contribution to other people's learning, or to use Freire's metaphor, to other people's constant becoming (Freire, 1990, p.56-57), or to use Dewey's paradigm, growth (Wain, 2004, p.215). I could also appreciate what farmers like the leaders of the Mġarr co-op could contribute to other people's learning. I could reflect upon the learning paths, mostly informal and incidental, that had enabled humble farmers without any formal academic qualifications to grow into local leaders, who could find personal fulfilment in empowering their local rural communities to work and struggle towards achieving shared goals. I could appreciate also the paths of people who had strayed away from

the family farms to study and make a career elsewhere. I could surmise how they found in the co-operative model a way how to come back to their farming community and contribute towards its survival but also its development and re-invention. I consider myself to be one of these returners. All of this has enabled me to have a critical look at my own development as heir to a family tradition rooted in a rural way of life, as an activist, as an adult educator, as an academic, and finally as a person in constant search for fulfilment and growth.

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