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The Development of the Cooperative Movement and Civil Society in Almeria, Spain: Something from Nothing?

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Abstract: Cooperatives fulfilled a broad and central role not only in the economic development, but also in the creation of civil society, in a population decimated and fragmented by the politics and culture of the Franco dictatorship. The province of Almeria, Spain, is an example of smallholding rapid development due to the expansion of intensive greenhouse horticulture. It was the poorest Spanish province per capita in 1955, semi-arid, drought-ridden, and devoid of significant infrastructure. Its undereducated population held little promise for economic growth and a massive migration out of the province left it depopulated. Subsequent economic and social development of Almeria was closely tied to the establishment of both credit and agricultural cooperatives, which supported a new greenhouse agriculture for small plot family farmers organized around cooperatives. This paper focuses on how cooperatives were fundamental in constructing civil society for the benefit of poor rural people, even in the presence of significant negative social capital and undemocratic institutions during the Franco dictatorship. As the sector has modernized and matured, cooperatives have led the sustainable transformation of the business ecosystem. However, current shortcomings in the Almeria cooperative movement and civil society and challenges yet to be met are also raised.

Keywords: agricultural cooperatives; civil society; cooperative banks; local development; sustainable innovation

1. Introduction and Theoretical Framework

In the 1950s and 1960s Almeria, a province of Southern Spain, was known for its abject poverty and bare and arid landscapes. The photograph series of *La Chanca* by Carlos Pérez Siquier [1] from the mid-1950s to 1960s, chronicled the misery and poverty of its inhabitants and the harshness of its climate. So notable was its poverty that it was the subject of several exposés, such as Juan Goytisolo's *Campos de Nijar* [2] and *La Chanca* [3] denouncing the slavery conditions of its inhabitants who were subject to barbaric exploitation. In terms of gross domestic product (GDP) per capita in 1955, Almeria ranked last (less than 50% of the Spanish average) in an already poor Spain suffering from the autarky imposed by the Franco dictatorship. This rural Spain was also characterized as “people without land, and land without people” due to its severe depopulation [4,5]. Older residents from the area, asked to describe the situation in interviews 50 years later, all repeatedly said “there was nothing, nothing” (*no había nada, nada*) [6].

Currently, this province of Almeria is known within Europe as an example of rapid development agricultural smallholding due to the expansion of intensive greenhouse agriculture. What many do not know is that it is based on family farms predominantly organized around cooperatives. About 32,000 ha are under greenhouse cultivation [7] and the average landholding, sufficient to support a family, is two hectares, most held by farmers or small SMEs (small to medium-sized enterprises) who are members of the 80 agricultural cooperatives and producer organizations. Agriculture provides employment for 76,000 people (in addition to owner-farmers). Annual turnover for 2018/2019 was 2228 million Euros (an annual increase of 5.3%), 2.7 million tons, and 80% of product was exported, with an annual increase of 10% [7]. The agricultural production of Almeria represents 25% of the Andalusian agricultural GDP. In addition, the benefits of such development have been noted to be widely distributed [8] and Almeria is ranked among the top third of Spanish provinces in GDP per capita.

The rapid change in the social-economic condition of Almeria in a relatively short period of time begs the question of how something came from “nothing”.

The development of what is locally referred to as the “miracle of Almeria” cannot be explained without understanding the role of its cooperative movement, comprised of the local cooperative bank, farmers’ marketing and supply cooperatives, cooperative associations, and other related entities. This paper argues that cooperatives were not only able to “build something from nothing” economically, but that they were also able to create social capital amongst fragmented and disenfranchised people and foster civil society that worked to the benefit of the rural poor. This is not to suggest however, that there was “nothing”; for indeed there were institutions such as the State, the Church, and the Family, brimming with social relations and networks, some of which will be described herein. However, civil society entities were almost non-existent, given the long tentacles of the dictatorship and the Church in public and private life. The abovementioned “*nada*” is a testament to the fact that nothing existed for the benefit of certain groups.

With respect to the creation of social capital, settling on its definition is no simple task, as acknowledged in other works [9,10]. Bebbington et al. [11] note that the literature on social capital offered various views: social capital may refer to resources that flow through a network or simply to a resource (“capital”), like others, to gain benefit. Putman’s emphasis is seen to be on the network structure itself [11]. According to both sociologists [12,13] and economists [9,14], economic development as well as cooperation appears to rely heavily on social capital. Three main families of social capital have been identified as trust, cooperation, and networks by Paldam [15,16], which group together main social capital literature. Reference is made to Putnam’s voluntary organizations and their intensity [17], the emphasis on trust by Coleman [12], and network theories of Lin [18], amongst many others. Woolcock [19] pointed out the ability of “bridging” social capital to build bridges to valuable resources outside a community through social relationships, in addition to the “bonding” social capital of personal relationships (family and identity-based communities). Lest we think that social capital in and of itself is a positive good, authors have pointed out that the social capital does not always have beneficial impacts [17,20,21] contributing at times to social coercion. Social capital can also be destroyed, for example by dictatorships, as studies in Eastern Europe have shown [16]. What is of interest in this paper, is the formation of social capital which provided positive benefits and contributed to the creation of civil society entities for the excluded and poor, under, and as an alternative to, the harsh Franco Regime.

Consequently, it is noted that social capital is frequently identified with the workings of civil society [17,22]. Fukuyama claims that “[a]n abundant stock of social capital is presumably what produces a dense civil society” [14] (p. 11). Dasgupta observes that engagements that rely on what is called social capital occur somewhere between the individual and the State: that they are conducted within informal institutions, and when applied to horizontal networks, social capital is identified with the workings of civil society [10]. According to the World Bank, civil society refers to a wide array of organizations: “Community groups, non-governmental organizations, labor unions, indigenous groups, charitable organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations,

and foundations” [23]. Ostrom has noted many empirical cases of cooperative norms arising as a result of repeated community interaction, presumably indicating social capital, at least in communities that have successfully governed common pool resource problems [24]. Understanding the relationship between community and social capital also requires us to consider the membership of communities as well as different strengths and functions of social capital. Bridging social capital has been seen by Granovetter [25,26], for the most part, to be based on “weak ties” to external information, material, and political resources, wherein an aggregate of weak ties leads to a strength in civic culture or civil society. O’Brien [13] discusses the exceptions to the assumption that bridging social capital is necessarily based on weak ties, citing the example of agricultural cooperatives, amongst others.

The case study presented here serves as a juncture for the many inter-related themes inherent in the areas of local development, civil society, bridging and bonding social capital, the definition of communities, sustainability, and the role cooperatives. Central to the analysis is the assertion that cooperatives created strong community ties out of a fragmented population, filled a civil society vacuum, and contributed to alternative, non-state institution building. The cooperative movement did not have its roots in pre-existing territorial or community ties (bonding social capital), as its family member base was predominantly from other areas, driven by economic necessity to populate the region. This latter point distinguishes Almeria from other cooperative economy areas of Spain, such as the Basque region and Valencia, where culture and territory served an important function: The “something” which formed the base for civil society and/or collective action. After the arrival of democracy, these cooperatives and civil society entities contributed to a more sustainable social, economic, and environmental development.

The Almeria experience serves as an important example to other regions which have been devastated by population shifts, violence, coercive governments, and/or situations with scarce natural or human resources. In addition, this paper demonstrates that the creation of social capital and civil society is not sequential or linear (in either direction), but rather it is dynamic. Civil society organizations (e.g., cooperatives) can also create social capital. Various, and perhaps competing, forms of social capital can exist simultaneously in the same community, some contributing to civil society while other forms of social capital destroy or inhibit its creation. This was particularly the case of Franco’s Spain where the institutions of State and Church, both which attempted to control the Family with an ideological iron grip, were decisive in guarding against the creation of civil society. The door should also be left open to consider that cooperatives leveraged existing “negative” or neutral social capital and existing institutions to set up an alternative and cooperative network that nurtured civil society entities and created positive social capital for the benefit of previously excluded groups. Finally, the case study should also serve as a warning that cooperative communities, their social capital, and the civil societies in which they participate are dynamic and rooted in context. With time the formerly excluded can become non-inclusive to a wide range of stakeholders.

2. Methodology

A case study is carried out in the rural area of southeast Spain to explore the relationship between cooperatives and social capital and the role of cooperatives in building rural civil society and creating positive and sustainable economic and social impact. This paper focuses on a subject thus far not considered within the agricultural and credit cooperative movement in Almeria: The creation of social capital by the cooperative movement during the Franco years amongst the rural poor and excluded, which subsequently led to the cooperative movement filling a civil society vacuum and creating new non-state institutions which form the backbone of the socio-economic context in Almeria.

The single case study method employed here is useful when attempting to understand unique and complex phenomena [27], where multiple sources of evidence need to “converge in a triangularity fashion” (p. 18), and where inquiry “benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions” (p. 18) to guide data collection and analysis. Given the need to revisit the roots of Almeria’s cooperative movement to better understand the complex dynamic of economic, historical, political,

social, and environmental factors, a single case study method [27] is not only justified, but necessary. Five components of research design for the case study method have been utilized in this case study (p. 27). A summary of its application to the Almeria case follows:

The case study's main questions:

- What is the role of cooperatives in constructing civil society?
- How can something come from nothing? Or more specifically, how do we solve the paradox of how social capital can be created where it is weak or non-existent [13] or where trust created by social capital does not exist [28].
- What are the prerequisites for the construction of civil society? Does civil society rely on a pre-existing or "dense" social capital [14], strong ties of bonding capital, weak or strong ties of bridging capital [13,19], or territory or community [29]?
- Can civil society be constructed amongst negative social capital or in social capital destroying regimes [16,17,20,21]?
- Does collaborative activity or management of common goods create a social capital base which evolves into civil society and trust [30]?

Its propositions:

- The Almeria cooperative movement was able to build social capital and civil society amongst a disenfranchised, fragmented, migrant population, with no notable pre-existing social capital or prior collaborative activity.
- Unlike other cooperative movements in Spain, it did not rely on existing territorial or community ties (bonding social capital).
- The Almeria cooperative movement filled a civil society vacuum and contributed to alternative non-state institution building and parallel civil society, leveraging existing institutional structures and counter-acting negative social capital.
- Both bonding and bridging social capital relied on strong and weak ties.
- Cooperatives which previously have been inclusive, may become exclusive as they become entrenched and new stakeholders evolve, creating shortcomings in their contribution to civil society.

Its unit of analysis:

- The agricultural sector of Almeria which arose during the Franco Regime until present.

The logic linking the data to propositions:

- "Explanation building," "pattern matching, and cross case analysis" with reference to historical and academic works prior to, during and post-Franco. Hereafter, Section 3 sets out a narrative, weaving in the propositions (Section 3.1) and the "logic linking data to propositions" in Section 3.2, Section 3.3, Section 3.4, Section 3.5, Section 3.6, and Section 3.7 deals specifically with the last proposition above.

The criteria for interpreting the findings:

- Confirm, challenge, or expand theory: Identification and addressing of rival and compatible explanations and application of theory [27], as well as challenging prior historical claims and academic analysis.

To delve more deeply into this complex case study, new historical and desk research, interviews, previous literature published on Almeria by the author [31] and others, as well as an unpublished 2010 conference paper, are revisited, triangulated, and analyzed through the lens of cooperatives, social capital, and civil society. The case study is described in Section 3.1 Almeria Case Study Justification, elaborating on main questions and propositions described briefly in the Introduction and Theoretical

Framework in Section 1. Agricultural cooperatives in Spain pre-civil war are briefly described in Section 3.2 Historical Context of Cooperatives in Spain (early 20th c) and also during the Franco years in the rural south of Spain in Section 3.3 Franco Years and the Rural South to provide context. Section 3.4 Context prior to Almeria Cooperative Movement describes the pre-cooperative landscape specifically in Almeria, and is followed by the birth of the Almeria cooperative movement in Section 3.5 The Birth of the Almeria Cooperative Movement during the Franco Regime, wherein the case study explores how the Almeria credit and agricultural cooperatives came to be and their role in building social capital and civil society. Section 3.6 From Post-Franco Transition to Current Almeria Cooperative Movement explores the role of cooperatives in the post Franco transition and finally, the new challenges which face the cooperatives in their contribution to civil society and response to the local community, or failure to do so, are addressed in Section 3.7 Shortcomings of Civil Society in the Current Almeria Cooperative Movement. Conclusions follow in Section 4.

3. Case Study

3.1. Almeria Case Study Justification

The development of Almeria as a case study has been approached from several different perspectives. It has been studied with respect to multifunctional development policy [32–34] and clusters and competitive advantage [35]. Numerous studies on marketing, logistics, and perishable supply chains have been carried out [36,37]. More recently, there has been an emphasis on transitioning to a more sustainable productive system [38–40].

Yet with respect to the role of cooperatives and the cooperative movement in the social transformation of Almeria, a surprising silence has existed, given their historical and continuing central protagonism as a business form. The economic studies institute of the local cooperative bank has included the study of cooperatives in their review of “social economy,” along with other social enterprises, but the approach to cooperatives has been akin to studying them as “producer organizations,” a rather agnostic form of regulated (agricultural policy) collective marketing entities, and their economic impact. From the legal perspective, the organizational challenge of integration of cooperatives has been touched on [41], and analysis has been carried out on the switch from a social conception of cooperative legislation to a more economic model [42], but these latter legal studies necessarily deal with the more abstract and jurisdictional level of the regional and national governments, and not specifically Almeria. A few studies have been carried out on the social aspect of Almeria cooperatives, some of which have touched on but not dealt in-depth with the issue of cooperatives and civil society. Lifecycles of agricultural cooperative sectors of Almeria and Valencia have been contrasted, with a specific emphasis on the distinctive features of the cooperative business model [43]. Cooperative finance and social enterprise [44] have been explored, along with cooperative finance and innovation [45] with the general observation that cooperatives filled a civil society gap. However, for the majority of the economists in studies cited above, the roots of Almeria greenhouse agricultural economic activity side steps the cooperative *movement*. In fact, more credit is given to the resettlement programs of the National Institute of Colonization under Franco’s regime, which settled people where water could be exploited, than the intentional activity of the cooperative movement, which sought to build an equitable economy for poor farmers. Given the abject failure of such colonization program, explained further herein, and the continuing success of the cooperative business form in Almeria, it is a curious state of affairs.

It is possible that the role of cooperatives in *social* transformations during and after the Franco years is less studied in Spain because it would require disturbing a certain “pact” about leaving history alone. The Historical Memory movement in Spain and the subsequent law [46] enacted to acknowledge the violence suffered by people during the Spanish Civil War and the ensuing Franco dictatorship continues to generate enormous disagreement. Detractors of restless historians prefer not to disturb old wounds, claiming that there were no “winners” but loss on both sides. Yet it is precisely because of

these difficult histories that it is worth understanding how cooperatives have contributed to rebuilding and/or reshaping societies that have gone through dictatorships and social and economic crises, not to mention how they will deal with climate change and an array of environmental, economic, and social crises currently and in the future, where winners and losers will most certainly be evident.

Revisiting briefly the role of cooperative finance, innovation, and community building in previous work [45] where the agricultural sector activity of Almeria was described in four stages, the focus on the cooperative institutional response emphasized economic phases: Initial activity (pre1960–1975); the “take-off” period (1975–1990); maturity (1990–2000); and spillover (2000–onwards). At each stage, the financial needs of farmers and their cooperatives were identified, and the role played by the various financial entities, predominantly that of the cooperative bank, Cajamar, was explored. It was found that the cooperative bank’s role included, but went far beyond, a relationship-based supply of credit; rather it was a constant source of and impetus for sustainable technical and organizational innovation. Focusing on theories of industrial districts, in this case an agro-industrial district developed by Aznar-Sánchez [47], it was found that due to the cooperative bank’s growth strategies, the common pitfalls of industrial districts were avoided. These traditional shortcomings include structural deficits of an economy heavily dependent on small firms and sectoral specialization, with mature products exposed to low wage competition [48] (p. 466) and slowness in adopting new technologies, lack of financial management expertise, lack of knowledge, and failure to innovate [49].

The present case study is not characterized within the context of industrial districts, but it is worth noting that the concept “industrial district” as described by Becattini [50] (p. 38) as a “social-territorial entity . . . characterized by the active presence of both a community of people and a population of firms in one naturally and historically bounded area” is relevant from the social perspective when considering cooperatives and bonding and bridging social capital. Prior work [45] has shown that the cooperative banks played an instrumental role in the incorporation of new technologies, management training, and the creation of an innovative knowledge/technological based society. Flexibility, assumption of risk and commitment to supporting local economies and production activities were also demonstrated. The authors in this prior study suggested that cooperative finance could act as a catalyst in innovation and the creation of community, and noted that the cooperative finance benefited the farmers, absent both State investment and lack of other of civil society institutions. In another work which valued the role of cooperatives in the development of Almeria, the dynamic nature of the lifecycle of the agricultural cooperative communities in Almeria and Valencia was further explored, which lends support to the idea of a dynamic relationship between cooperatives and their communities and members [43]. Yet the central issue of social capital has not been addressed in the development of Almeria, although in other areas of Spain, it has been discussed (see Section 3.2 below).

A question posed by O’Brien [13], “how can social capital itself be created where it is weak or non-existent?” is relevant to the case study under consideration, as well as his observation that formal institutions can generate, strengthen, weaken, or destroy social capital. The distinction between “bonding” social capital (relationships that provide identity in family and community) and “bridging” social capital (relationships that allow links to outside information, political support, and resources) also serves to help unravel the role of cooperatives in Almeria. Generally, but not always, strong ties characterize bonding social capital, and weak ties are seen to support bridging social capital [25,26]. In the case of cooperative structures this may prove otherwise [51], where strong ties would support bridging social capital, although it would most likely be context specific. Also, certain institutional arrangements may create an advantage for “some groups to develop their social capital while hindering the social capital development of other groups” [13] (p. 217). Following this line of thinking, we might then ask how social capital for a disenfranchised group was created, and if and how this social capital formed the basis of civil society. In the particular context of a dictatorship where the institutions of the State, the Church, and the Family were conflated and ever-present, dictating all forms of public and private activity, the creation of a parallel (and/or simultaneous) social capital and civil society is of interest.

3.2. Historical Context of Cooperatives in Spain (Early 20th c.)

As can be seen in Figure 1, the degree of formation of cooperatives varied greatly across Spain in the 1920s. In the south, across Andalusia, and in the province of Almeria in particular, very few were present.

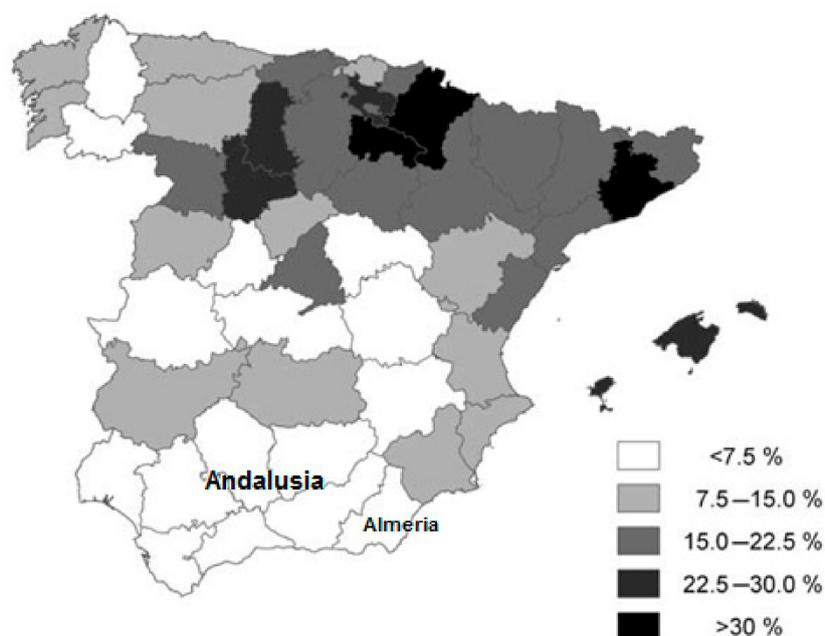


Figure 1. Agrarian cooperatives, 1923 (members over agrarian population). Sources: Jefatura Superior de Estadística (1926); Dirección General del Instituto Geográfico y Estadístico (1922).

Beltrán-Tapia, writing of the emergence of agricultural cooperatives in the early 20th century in Spain, relies heavily on the “pre-existing stock” of social capital in the form of the communities that managed common goods or collective resources, such as common lands or irrigation communities [30] (cf. Ostrom [24]), pointing out that some of these communities had their origins in the medieval times (in parts of Andalusia, irrigation systems were set up by the Arabs). But subsequent changes, such as the mass privatization of public lands [30] (pp. 515–516) or the fact that in order to be part of the irrigation community one had to be a land owner, were seen to reinforce existing power imbalances and favor large land owners. Other variables in addition to public and private common lands and irrigation communities considered by Beltrán-Tapia included physical quality of life (the concept borrowed from Zamagni [52]), urbanization, access to land, and access to land/average plot size. However, overall, Beltrán-Tapia concludes that the existence of collectively used resources, particularly common lands, contributed to the emergence of agricultural cooperatives by providing social networks and by building mutual knowledge and trust (p. 524).

Garrido [53] found that, in general, rural elites were not supportive of cooperatives, so as to continue to maintain control over labor, land, and credit. He also points out that the widespread poverty of farmers contributed to the failure of cooperatives, given lack of capital and access to credit. In a later work [29], he refers to community irrigation institutions, cooperatives and the citrus industry in eastern Spain to demonstrate the negative effects of social capital and to show that social capital also hindered “bridging” cooperation. In the period before 1960, he points out that at least 70% of Spanish oranges came from a small area in the provinces of Valencia and Castellon along the Mediterranean coast. This area had the largest citrus orchards and irrigation communities in eastern Spain. Farmers collaborated on irrigation, fertilizers, etc., yet in the 1920s, below 10% of product was marketed by Spanish cooperatives, compared to California (approximately 75%) and Florida (approximately 20%). He notes that, after centuries of accumulation of social capital, 20th century eastern Spain did not

have a generalized culture of cooperation (note that the area of Almeria is in southeast Spain, and not included in such study).

With respect to Andalusia, where cooperatives were scarce at such time, high level champions of agricultural cooperatives linked to the Catholic social movement did exist, such as Viscount Eza, general director of agriculture during the 1915–1916. Involved in the Institute of Social Reform, he was a proponent of social Catholicism, and was responsible, during a time, for the State-run agricultural settlement programs. He continued until 1926. The resettlement or “colonization” program’s direct goal was the creation of a network of small landholders (“colonies”) who were considered “easy prey for revolutionaries” [54] (p. 354). In addition, certain large agricultural lands were proposed as “social laboratories” in which large landowners could parcel out and rent their land to small farmers, and where “the small farmer, their families, and cooperatives would be in charge of solving the great social conflicts” (p. 360, translation by author). Another model of “colonization” not based on cooperatives but on exploiting untapped water resources, was also attempted across a wide range of settlements, the idea being that appropriate infrastructure for irrigated lands would solve the problem of depopulation in arid rural areas, as well as increase production (pp. 360–362). In this case, it was the State that was to oversee such infrastructure and capital investment.

With the arrival of the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera in 1923 agricultural reform was oriented in a different direction [54] (p. 358). To give a sense of such direction: upon refusing to call elections he noted “the country is no longer impressed with movies about liberal and democratic essences: they want order, work and economy” (*El país no se impresiona ya con películas de esencias liberales y democráticas; quiere orden, trabajo y economía*—translated by author) [55]. The former agricultural provincial and local bodies and jurisdiction were abolished, and a regime was set up where groups of tenants, appropriately politically screened, who wished to buy land would be allowed to do so. However, the south of Spain, including Almeria, was completely overlooked [54] (p. 359) and no investment in infrastructure, common buildings, housing, or social programs was carried out at the cost of the State.

3.3. Franco Years and the Rural South

Fifty thousand people were executed after the civil war ended in 1939. The Franco years are known for harsh political repression, but the economic suffering caused by inept policies which resulted in mass starvation, black markets, and dire poverty, particularly during the 1940s, is less well known. Franco’s dictatorship stubbornly insisted on economic autarky, with an interventionist policy modelled after Nazi Germany and Italian Fascism, putting most of its emphasis on industrialization and manufacturing. Very few resources were dedicated to support agriculture or to feed its population [5] (pp. 388–389). Failures were falsely blamed on weather, lack of labor, etc., in Francoist propaganda [56] (p. 387). In the post war years 1939 to 1945, 200,000 Spaniards died of starvation. From 1935 to 1945, real incomes had dropped by 66%. In 1950 Spanish disposable income was 40% lower than Italy. Economic reforms in 1952 and the almost 500 million of U.S. economic assistance which was conditioned on allowing a U.S. military base, did little to alleviate the economic disaster [57] (p. 12). Within an already poor Spain, the province of Almeria was last, with a level of income 50% lower than the national average [58] (p. 76). The province of Almeria was deeply rural and isolated in terms of infrastructure. Three hundred and fifty thousand people migrated from Almeria between 1900 and 1981, a figure which represented 95% of its population in 1900 [59]. From the point of view of pre-existing social capital being based on community, territory, family ties (strong ties), or commerce and economic activity (weak ties), it is easy to understand that there was a perception of *nada*.

After 20 years of varying degrees of economic failures and devastating impacts from attempts at intervention and control of markets [56] (pp. 387–397), Franco implemented the 1959 Liberalization and Stabilization Plan, a set of reforms which opened up the market to capitalistic practices with the dictatorship still strongly in place. To put the situation in context, Spain did not recover its pre-Civil War per capita GDP peak levels (1929) until 1955, while other western European countries

reached, on average, 1938 levels of GDP per capita by 1950 [60]. Spain joined major international organizations, increasingly committing the government to the free-market discipline, and the economy as a whole began to improve. Economic isolation was waning, and foreign investment began to flow in: \$40 million in 1960 to \$697 million in 1970. Tourism went from six million visitors in 1960 to 30 million in 1975, generating \$3 billion. However, 2.6 million Spaniards also emigrated to work in other European countries, sending their money back home and injecting much needed capital in a still weak economy. Rural areas were further depopulated when an additional six million relocated to other urban areas of Spain [57] (pp. 12–13). Income disparity increased: In 1974, the year before Franco's death, half of the population received 20% of disposable national income while the other half enjoyed 80%. Within the latter group, 10% took 40% of such income. Geographically, the benefits of economic and social development were also unevenly distributed, and the rural areas of Andalusia (which includes Almeria) were at the bottom of the list. Among its extremely poor, and mostly illiterate inhabitants, social services were almost non-existent [57] (p. 14).

An intense destruction of human capital occurred as a result of this political exile and post-war political repression [61,62]. Cazorla-Sánchez noted that, "Francoism created an affordable, disciplined workforce which was achieved by the killing of union leaders, by the destruction of genuine, representative organizations and by instilling fear and pessimism in the general population" [57] (p. 15). The State guaranteed employers and both local and international Spanish capital, a "business friendly" environment with low taxes, a captive consumer market, and a fearful and cheap workforce [63] (pp. 277–300). The public expenditure and investment of the state in its citizens was extremely low: in 1965, public expenditure was 15% of GDP (OECD average was 31%). In 1970 it was barely 20.1% of GDP, compared with France (51%), Italy (43.3%), UK (53.2%), and Germany (36.8%) [64] (p. 877). This state of affairs is important in understanding the social and economic institutional vacuum that was the result of the dictatorship and its policies and the subsequent influential role that cooperatives would later play in filling in civil society.

3.4. Context Prior to Almeria Cooperative Movement

Almeria has experienced a huge transformation in the last 50 years. Between 1970 and 2000 alone, the rate of population increase of the province was 90% more than that of Spain as a whole, 84% more in production, and 130% growth in employment than the rest of the country. During this period it also grew 20% in GDP and between 1994 and 2002 Almeria's GDP nearly quadrupled relative to the regional and national averages [65,66]. It grew in terms of population and in wealth [67] (p. 15), but the Almeria agricultural sector and economy was less than promising prior to the arrival of cooperatives.

Various sources of finance operated in Almeria before the start of its cooperative movement: regular commercial banks (for example Banco Bilbao, its head office in the wealthy Basque region), foreign capital, private banks, savings banks related to the Church, as well as some public finance in the form of development programs. Social programs, such as schools, residences, social housing, seniors clubs, etc., were financed by such savings banks [68] (p. 578) but they did not lend to poor farmers. They did, however, offer credit to the established and profitable inland grape and citrus rural agricultural sector in cooperation with the National Agricultural Credit Service (Servicio Nacional del Crédito Agrícola) in 1956 [68,69] (p. 262 and p. 578, respectively).

The 30,000 hectares within the province of Almeria now covered with greenhouses had already been declared a Zone of National Interest in the 1940s, in order to introduce an irrigation strategy to exploit underground aquifers. The Regime was interested in increased agricultural production. As a result, a program was implemented by the National Institute for Colonization (NIC) to provide wells and pumps, with the result that a few hundred hectares were able to be supplied with water by small gasoline pumps, the scarcity and irregularity of electricity precluding much more [58] (p. 82). Unfortunately, the subterranean waters were quite saline and not particularly suited for cultivation. However, a solution was found by farmers who had come from the interior part of the province and resettled. The "technological innovation" of the time consisted of putting down a layer of fertilizer,

then covering this with by a layer of sand, in order to keep the roots moist and act as a filter for the salinated water. Farmers from the mountain regions and inland had also been accustomed to grape production using trellises, so they built structures with uprooted wooden trellis posts—carried down from mountains—and galvanized wire and covered them with cane to reduce the effects of strong winds common in the region. With the arrival of plastic, a clear plastic sheet was put overhead. These structures served as the first rudimentary greenhouses [45].

An electrification plan allowed for more efficient water pumps than those of gasoline, and an unsustainable model of development based on using subterranean waters was put into motion in 1961 by the State. The 1962 Agricultural Census indicated that 6195 hectares were irrigated and devoted to the cultivation of vegetables. Agricultural activity served as a lure for people from other areas (such as the mountains or the interior) and agricultural land was offered for sale. Presented with the choice of emigrating to far off places or the possibility to start a farm and own a small parcel (maximum 3.5 hectares), many families took a chance. They sold off what they could or relied on savings (if any). Not everyone was eligible, even if they did possess the resources. A selection process declaring the prospective purchaser “fit to work” was required, such selection process serving as a political screening. It should be emphasized that without irrigation and at least rudimentary greenhouse technology the small pieces of land on offer were not able to feed a family, and without a path to reach markets it was not economically feasible to provide sufficient income to support a family either [56] (p. 408). The settlement or “colonization” program was not intended to improve the lives of such farmers, but rather to exploit existing resources (cheap labor and underground water) and increase agricultural production. In fact, as a settlement or “colonization” program it was a failure. Instead of settling the 25,212 people the Franco Regime claimed, it only managed to settle 1759 (p. 408). But more importantly, given that the aim of building such colonies was the exploitation of water, and not community building or long term sustainable agriculture, without cooperatives, any communities that would have been established would have most likely dissolved upon the water resources being spent.

With increased production by use of irrigation and basic greenhouses in Almeria, families needed to sell their production. However, there were few organized marketing efforts and farmers ended up settling for very low farm gate prices. Commercialization was controlled by larger companies from Murcia, Alicante, and Valencia and sometimes foreign multi-national firms, who would buy Almeria product and re-export it [45]. Local Almeria firms solicited to be included in the Official Register of Exporters but were denied by the Regime’s Administration, which reasoned that they did not meet minimum conditions and that they were not in operation long enough [70]. The reasons given by the administration to exclude Almeria firms from exportation of tomatoes were suspect: it was claimed that the rapid increase in production occurred too quickly and thus there was not sufficient preparation. In addition, it cited poor rail communication, although the railway was State owned and, by design of the State, closed for part of the year. Finally, it claimed that Almeria did not have an official quota for the exportation of tomatoes (which quota was designated by the State), although it was the main producer [70].

Various non-cooperative auction houses began to operate on the initiative of entrepreneurial middlemen, backed by foreign and local capital, at times fronting the costs of seeds and supplies and subtracting it from revenues upon harvest. Although the auction houses served a networking purpose, allowing for networking and “weak ties” social capital to be built in their general meeting areas, as they went on to become more complex, providing an organization for export, credit fertilizers, insecticides, and other farm materials, they also became more exploitative. Lack of transparency in prices and price fixing between large auction houses occurred. Lines of credit and provision of seed and materials left farmers in dire circumstances if they had a poor harvest and they lost their land to the auction houses. Auction houses would then resell or rent the land to young farmers with an exclusive contract to sell their goods, thus allowing the auction house to fill up their warehouses with product and undermine the efforts of farmer cooperatives [69] (p. 234). A cooperative auction house (founded in the 40s, now CASI) did exist, but it lacked sufficient capital until funded by the cooperative bank [45].

Local Almeria economists [67,71] claim that, in general, “financing needs were low and there was very little linkage between financial and agricultural sectors.” Production depended on natural factors (availability of some water, cheap land, and a sunny climate), abundance of cheap and young labor, and low capital requirements given basic technology and the absence of a marketing structure. The agricultural activity is described as being squarely within the primary sector and value added based on sheer labor effort [43,45]. What little financial intermediation existed was noted to be largely through the auction house. This analysis misses an important fact: there was a crucial need for financing (however low) by the farmers. Those that had no capital needed a way to turn the only thing they did have—labor—into capital. Additionally, they also needed capital and an organization to create a system of commercialization. While technology was basic, it was still significantly more expensive than non-irrigated farming. Without access to capital, living on otherwise worthless land, further development would have been difficult if not impossible. At best, they would have been part-time subsistence farmers, working as wage labor for the Almeria urban class [45].

The irrigation development model as set up by the Regime was socially, economically, and environmentally unsustainable, relying on the over-exploitive use of water, under-investment in further technology, infrastructure, and commercial avenues, and no investment in the people actually working the land. Farmers endured terrible living conditions, without proper housing or sanitation. Children worked, often missing school entirely [57] (p. 107). Water pumped up for irrigation became more and more saline, creating problems in production, plant disease, and the further mineralization of the soil.

3.5. The Birth of the Almeria Cooperative Movement during the Franco Regime

It was against this backdrop that the cooperative movement was born. To be clear, it is true that cooperative legislation under the Franco Regime, through its 1942 Law of Cooperatives, recognized the importance of having “a” cooperative movement which was structured to be consistent with the Regime (which should not be confused with recognizing the importance of “the” cooperative movement). The cooperative movement under Franco hoped to structure society so that both labor and management held their “proper place” in society—cooperatives were to serve as a method to control and contain labor, giving them small tidbits of choice (e.g., voting on certain issues within the cooperative). This eventually led to the creation in 1957 of a National Caja Rural (rural cooperative credit bank) which took under its wing the already existing cooperative rural banks operating in Spain. In 1962 a new law for the regulation of the finance sector in general in Spain was introduced, and in 1964 the National Caja Rural was reorganized and strengthened and put under the supervision of the Minister of Finance [68].

In the 1960s the Almeria cooperative movement, and specifically in 1963 the “Caja Rural Provincial de Almeria,” began on the initiative of a few local people, amongst them a young lawyer named Juan del Águila Molina, a worker in the Union of Irrigated Land Farmers and later in the Union of Field Cooperatives. These “social capital” unions, or “sindicatos” were not what we would understand as labor unions—rather they were Regime sponsored associations used to control and categorize workers—membership was obligatory. He was knowledgeable about the needs of small Almeria farmers, aware of cooperative credit organizations in other countries, particularly Raiffeisen, and a member of Acción Católica. He sought a development model that was between the Fascist Falange party and the outlawed Communist party. With his wife (so people would trust him) and a small car (out of necessity), he began to visit farmers in small towns and villages, encouraging the formation of “true” agricultural cooperatives [43,45,72]. Cooperatives at such time were usually based on municipalities, supplying tools and equipment as well as attempting to develop exportation channels. However, it became apparent that without some form of financing, it would be difficult for the farmers or cooperatives to succeed. Other sources of finance in the Province of Almeria would only lend to business and landowners who could provide security or guarantees. Even if the farmers did have land, such land was often not worth enough to secure the loans. Unsecured loans were initially given

by the cooperative bank, based on the promise of hard work, allowing labor to be transformed into capital [72] but also demonstrating trust in action.

As the cooperative bank was not officially set up to perform financial transactions, del Águila Molina withdrew the funds every morning, circulating amongst the farmers to do their “kitchen table” banking [72]. At the close of business, he would return with the money and deposit it in the Bank of Bilbao. In the meantime, a network was created. This continued until the cooperative bank was officially set up in 1966. When the credit cooperative was officially born, it could only give credits or make loans to agricultural cooperatives. It followed a strategy of creating more agricultural cooperatives in many small towns and villages, dedicating resources and people to increase the customer base. Deposits from the interior towns, where during the 50s and 60s the exportation of oranges and grapes was still somewhat profitable, were used to finance the emerging needs of the “new” irrigated farming on the coast [69] (p. 261). There was a double objective: to find new clients and to create an agricultural cooperative network throughout the province. The cooperative movement was the impetus for farmers to organize. As mentioned above, there was a vacuum of civil society, union leaders, and political organizers, and a profound distrust of institutions and authority. Even though “cooperatives” were still cooperatives under a dictatorship, the fact that they were small, self-governed, enterprises with the support of independent financing was the start of a new paradigm in the region. It may be that for many of these people, the cooperative was the first institution to earn their trust outside of the family. It is important to note that trust was not a common currency in Spain. Like many other areas of Spain, irrigation communities and worker unions existed in Almeria, yet they had not had any transformational impact on the creation of civil society.

Stepping outside the historical narrative for a moment, the matter of trust and family deserves an aside: trust relationships and the family are often considered to be part of the “strong ties” and “bonding” social capital. Trust, applicable to both strong and weak ties, is considered to be important for the functioning of civil society. But in Franco’s dictatorship special mention must be made of the Sección Femenina (the Women’s Section) which had an influence across all of Spain, essentially being the network by which the Dictatorship and the Church made inroads into the institution of the Family and the most intimate family relationships, so that Family and its traditional strong ties, came to be at the service of the dictatorship. The Sección Femenina was founded in 1934, gaining victors’ force after the Civil War. In 1939 it was given the task of molding the national identity of women, and by extension, the Family. It functioned during 40 years, with a monopolistic power, being the only entity encompassing all female activities during the Franco dictatorship. It was fervently religious and feminine role models and conduct were to be based on Isabella “the Catholic” and Santa Teresa [73,74]. Messages of the Sección Femenina were constant: radio, books, magazines, and the messages of mothers and grandmothers who were responsible for this indoctrination and unifying the State and the politics of the dictatorship, the Church, and the Family. Their role in society was dictated by the Sección Femenina: the home as the ideal place. If they wished to work, for example as a hairdresser, they would have to take special “education” courses and have the permission of their husbands. Women were also supposed to carry out social service, seen as an obligatory period of education, to be conformist and docile with respect to the political system [74]. But more sinister is the fact that women were told how to display emotion, and which emotions to avoid. They were to be silent, unassuming, always smiling, and in order to not threaten men, to reduce any superior intellect or intelligence. Even physical movements and tone of voice were mandated. They were not to complain about events concerning the Regime, the Church, or the Family, and even during suffering, the absence of a smile was seen as an offense. Given the power that the State and Church had and that women were to replicate the values of the Regime and to continue its culture, a culture which incidentally denied them even basic dignity, it is not difficult to imagine that lack of trust was common throughout society, given the lack of private space even within family.

This paper cannot do justice to the insidious negative social capital and networks produced by the Sección Femenina or its positive social capital destroying role, but it is a stark example of how the

Regime permeated all aspects of life and throughout all of Spain, including and perhaps especially rural areas, where so much social and economic suffering occurred. It is difficult to know during the Franco years if the cooperative movement in Almeria provided alternative social capital creation specifically for women and women farmers.

Cooperatives flourished and the cooperative bank proceeded to rapidly open modest buildings amongst the greenhouses which served as “branches” in the small towns and villages of the province. In 1971 vegetable cultivation occupied 9000 hectares and had become the motor of the Almeria economy. In 1972, the cooperative bank opened its own office in Almeria city (until then having operated out of the Union Organization building) [68] (pp. 589–590). Within 12 to 13 years, the cooperative bank had started up, “officially” providing financing, as opposed to holding deposits for only 7–8 of those years, helped to develop a “genuine” agricultural cooperative movement with the ownership and production still in the hands of family farms, and established innovations in knowledge networks and agricultural technologies [45]. Its actual “financial” activity was quite straightforward—simple credits and loans in keeping with traditional banking. Its growth was rapid. In 1970 agricultural loans equaled 200 million pesetas. Three years later this amount was 1268 million pesetas. In contrast, the well-established savings bank of Almeria had a volume of 862 million pesetas in agricultural loans. In 1975, the amount equaled 2490 million pesetas [45].

What is noteworthy is how such a cooperative movement and cooperative bank managed to do this during a dictatorship where capital and social structures, including the Family, were tightly controlled by the Regime and the Regime-friendly Church. Asked for his opinion on this, the founder of the cooperative bank stated that he thought the Franco Regime just had not paid any attention at first, never imagining that such success could come from the poor rural farmers. Cooperatives operated “under the radar,” in parallel, and at times using some of the same resources and institutions of the Regime, to construct their own alternative civil society and social capital. When the Regime noticed, the cooperative local production system was already well entrenched as the dominant social and economic institution in the province of Almeria [72]. It is difficult to overstate the loyalty to Cajamar as an institution and the strong ties generated, at least until recently. In oral interviews carried out by the author, many farmers tell of the frustration and humiliation of not being able to get loans from other credit institutions to build a basic concrete block house, to buy equipment or a small piece of land. Local offices which provided access and service where the farmers lived and worked, was new and unheard of from an institution. When Juan de Aguila-Molina died in December 2018 at 87 years old, it dominated Almeria newspapers, radios, and social media, with an outpouring of public emotion and collective grief for the figurehead of the cooperative movement.

3.6. From Post-Franco Transition to Current Almeria Cooperative Movement

Spain’s transition to democracy began with the death of Franco in 1975. The end of the dictatorship did not result in a changeover or redistribution, but rather a “transition” that maintained economic powers and influence, along with its dominant weak and strong ties firmly in place. While political freedoms improved, the Spanish economy went through difficult times and high unemployment. The loss of the paternalistic state was disorienting, and the fear of further violence and instability if the transition failed was constantly in the background. From the social perspective, Almeria’s growth had a cost. The Almeria model depended on the exploitation of the whole family. Seventy-five percent of parents preferred that their children go to university and only 5% wanted their children to become farmers [75]. The population of the area had grown over 250% and the relocation of people and reorganization of family ties caused social distress [59]. Alcoholism and delinquency rose as farmers shouldered more and more debt, and suicides became more common when enterprises failed [69] (p. 265).

Torcál and Montero have studied the formation of social capital in new democracies, focusing on Spain [28]. They found that despite the increase in political and social associations in the new democracy, there was a low presence of social capital and low levels of interpersonal trust, which remained unchanged throughout generations. This “cultural legacy” was found to have been

resistant to major economic, social, and political change. Echoing O'Brien's question, the authors also pose the "bootstrap" paradox raised by Whitely [76], wherein "a minimal amount of social capital has to exist already, if it is to be created, since networks of obligations can be constructed and maintained only in a context in which a minimal level of trust between individuals already exists." Yet the cooperative movement in Almeria had managed to build up its social capital from "*nada*" and then dug in its heels in the "new democracy" responding with new and increasing numbers of cooperative institutions. Farmers and their cooperatives needed additional institutions to transition to a democracy and to a market economy, so they created their own representative cooperative entities. In 1977 the Association of Almeria fruit and vegetable harvesters and exporters was founded, the members being mainly cooperatives and auctions (now Coexphal—Association of F&V producer organizations of Almeria). Quotas for export were distributed by the government in Madrid and every week Coexphal would send a person to represent Almeria and obtain the total quota for Almeria. This quota was then distributed by Coexphal amongst the Almeria members, with Coexphal guiding them through export practices and policies.

The over exploitation of the natural environment was also a cause for concern which needed an urgent response. Land became more in demand and scarcer, and prices climbed. Depleted underground aquifers threatened water levels and the saline content increased due to the unrestricted pumping and irrigation to feed expanding hectares of greenhouses. Mineralization of the soil increased, pesticides were overused, erosion was a problem as was waste disposal. Production decreased and energy prices started to climb. Supply overtook demand as other areas of Spain had also increased production (Murcia, Canary Islands, Valencia, etc.). Countries which had a favored status within the European Common Market and countries which had agreements which gave them preference (Holland, Morocco, Israel) were serious competitors [43,45]. This weakening position gave more market power to large agri-food companies [69] (pp. 264–265). Environmental, technical, market, and strategic innovation was necessary to address the wide range of environmental crises.

At such time there was no university or research centers which fulfilled a research function to meet innovation needs, so the cooperative movement created its own experimental and research center, testing and sharing results between all the agricultural cooperatives. Experimental and initial financial risk was taken on collectively, so that individual farmers did not have to do so. Water technologies were an important area of research and courses and scientific and informative reports were disseminated amongst the cooperatives and the farmers. In 1976, a cooperatively financed technical agricultural service was created, where the viability of new technologies was tested in order to provide information on establishing the adequate finance mechanisms that needed to be put in place for each new technology [77].

By assuming research expenses and experimental risk, the cooperative entities created a sense of community through a shared knowledge base. The cooperative movement also contributed to changing the mentality of the farmers: they were now participants in the commercialization process, with a deeper understanding of workings of the market and consumer demand. The lobby pressure that they, as a network of producer-exporters, could now exercise on the Administration became stronger as the sector grew, and they found themselves with a political voice and power not experienced before. In addition, research initiatives began to deal with important environmental issues, which was necessary from a sustainability point of view, but something that the family farmers would not have been able to undertake themselves, financially or technically.

With the foundations of export, finance, and technological research put in place, the process of rapid growth began in the new agricultural sector ("new" meaning for the most part drip irrigated greenhouses and a focus on export). With reliance on technology, the structuring of marketing systems, and the opening of new markets, particularly entrance into the European Union in 1986, and the Marrakech Agreement of 1995 liberalizing world trade, came the need for increased financing and increased coordination so that farmers could compete across Europe. The cooperative bank sought deposits from outside the province of Almeria, so that capital was no longer necessarily related to

territory. But as important was the organization of the cooperative institutions to meet the new challenges. Of note is the fact that Almeria had a large number of small to medium-sized cooperatives, all engaged in more or less the same activity. They were no match individually for European competitors. Yet efforts to merge cooperatives or to create second tier cooperatives largely failed. This meant that cooperative institutions like Coexphal (the association of fruit and vegetable producer organizations) and Cajamar cooperative bank and its research foundation, had great influence and acted as the conduit to outside markets and knowledge economies on behalf of their cooperative members. Board seats on each other's boards was common practice, creating a dense network. This influence allowed them to carry out change on a grand scale: for example, in 2007–2009 Coexphal was able to roll out the implementation of integrated pest management and biological control (using “good” insects to manage insects which damaged crops) across 90% of the sector in 18 months, significantly reducing pesticide use.

Another major change occurred in the composition of the “community.” Although farm labor was still provided by the family, additional workers were needed. Family farms begin to contract labor, often immigrants from Morocco, while their own children began to attend the new university (University of Almeria) to pursue professional careers. While small family farms continued to be the main productive unit, cooperative farmer members now had hired labor who did not directly enjoy the benefits or the strong ties of the agricultural cooperative community. As Figure 2 demonstrates, the percentage of Almeria's immigrant population grew more rapidly than other areas of Andalusia and Spain as a whole. Before the financial crisis, it reached over 22%, and in the decade thereafter has stabilized to approximately 20% of the total population. Most of the immigrants in Almeria are farm workers, predominantly from North Africa, but also Eastern Europe and West Africa. Immigrants in other areas in Andalusia such as Malaga, are mainly from the UK and other areas of Western Europe.

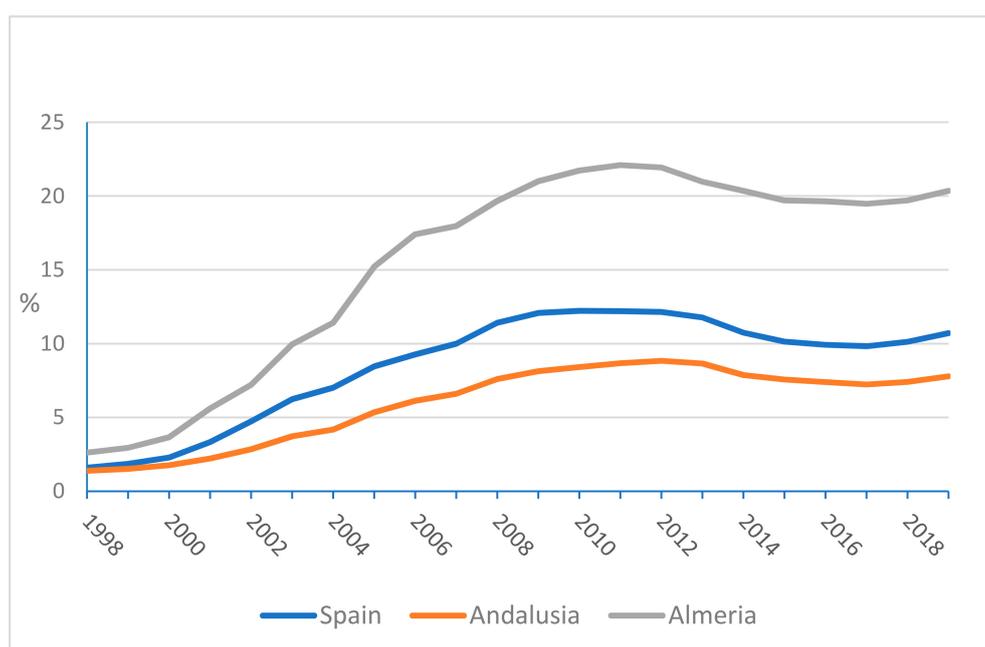


Figure 2. Immigrant population as a percentage of total population: Almeria, Andalusia, and Spain (years 1998–2019). Source: Instituto Nacional de Estadística (www.ine.es) [66].

There was notable progress in Almeria's interaction with foreign markets. The new technologies supported by cooperative research focused on environmental sustainability brought results. Support for other institutional entities was also part of the cooperative strategy. The Institute for Social and Economic Studies was created by the cooperative bank in 1998 to focus on the economic and social issues. Management training was introduced for cooperative boards, technical sessions for field

technicians, specialist agricultural courses and assistance with grant applications were offered by cooperatives. Information technology was also introduced into the cooperative sector. New lines of businesses in the cooperatives were created, supporting business associations related to agriculture not only financially but also utilizing its network of institutional contacts for the development of their projects. Business services and infrastructure become similar to that of industrial agri-business through the expanded services of Coexphal. This allowed small farmers and cooperatives to have access to the same type of professional services employed by larger agri-business actors and to compete accordingly, while maintaining the small-scale family farms and small first tier cooperatives. Coexphal went on to become one of the most influential forces in the Almeria agricultural sector, taking on the representation of the Andalusian producer organizations and also the Almeria and Andalusian agricultural cooperatives (formerly FAECA, now Andalusian Agri-Cooperatives). They are active in European-level entities which represent the sector, and lead on sustainability focused local initiatives, whether social, economic, or environmental.

As we can see, the role of cooperatives did not decrease when cooperative or sector size increased. The cooperative proactive role continued as the productive sector began to develop and mature and cooperative business model market share increased as demonstrated in Figure 3.

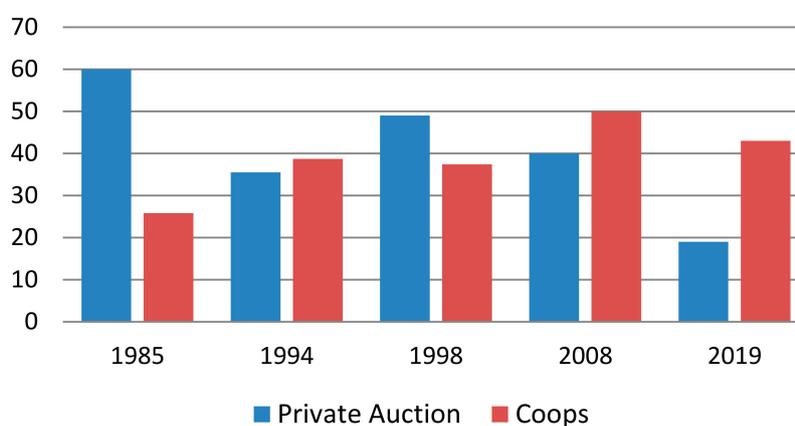


Figure 3. Type and number of cooperative and corporate agricultural commercialization entities. Source: Author elaboration based on Coexphal (Association of food and vegetable producer organizations of Almeria) information.

With such results above, if one accepts that social capital leads to a dense civil society, then the fact that cooperatives are still the main business model should speak well of the presence of social capital and civil society. However, that would be to accept a rather static view of social capital, civil society, and cooperatives. While it is important to understand the role that the cooperatives and the civil society institutions serve, one also has to consider those people and issues that may be disenfranchised under this now entrenched cooperative system.

This process is not unique to Almeria. For example, a similar cooperative dilemma is raised in the case of Mondragon, perhaps the most famous case of cooperatives within Spain to those outside of Spain. The town of Mondragón in northern Spain is home to Mondragon cooperative enterprises, which started in manufacturing and education in 1955, gaining legal recognition as cooperatives in 1959 under the Franco regime, and spread to local banking and finance and retailing. Like Almeria, the founder of the cooperative movement was part of the *Acción Católica*, rooted in European Catholic social doctrine [78]. However, in contrast to Almeria's cooperative movement, Mondragon's Catholic roots were the core of its identity, as was its sense of territory. Its aim was the "Christianization of industrial labor" and the reconciliation of capital and labor [79]. However, as Mondragon grew and, in particular, expanded globally, it became evident that subsidiaries were not set up as cooperatives, but as for-profit companies, the profit of which fed the Mondragon cooperatives in the Basque country.

The question of who benefitted from the cooperative movement, and more importantly, who did not, became central to criticism of the Mondragon model. The cooperatives were also noted to have a “cooperative aristocracy” of the founders’ followers, and to join the cooperative one had to meet a capital adequacy requirement and a selection test. In the past, workers have gone on strike in some of the Mondragon cooperatives, accusing it as being an “ally of the dictatorship” (p. 239), although the new business directors, after the founders’ death, tried to steer the cooperative to apolitical and nonideological grounds. This proved futile, as the Mondragon cooperative movement itself became a cultural asset and a representative of Basque civil society, self-governance, and economic organization (p. 240). Additionally, Molina and Walton observe the changing perception of Mondragon with respect to its civil society role and its community [79]. They note that the Basque cooperative abandoned its cultural foundations, and its social base was transformed into support for a secular Basque nationalism.

Although for different reasons and with different outcomes, both Mondragon and the cooperative movement of Almeria finds itself transformed but also disconnected, to a certain extent, from the original types of members and networks of social capital that provided the foundations for civil society, and that subsequently, once consolidated, have gone on to leave others disenfranchised. It appears that the building blocks of strong and weak ties of social capital, civil society and cooperatives are capable of being reconfigured and redefined so that they become parts of entrenched networks and civil society narratives, while new strong and weak ties form outside the dominant social capital networks. In doing so, they may inadvertently represent “negative” social capital for new or existing excluded groups or stakeholder interests.

3.7. Shortcomings of Civil Society in the Current Almeria Cooperative Movement

Amongst certain important stakeholders, the cooperative movement of Almeria is no longer seen as being inclusive or responsibly self-governing, particularly in light of legal and illegal immigration, waste management, use of natural resources, and environmental impact. Ecologists have pointed to biodiversity loss [80] and scientists have been critical of water use and continuing soil degradation and nitrate directive non-compliance [81]. The tourism industry has complained of the “ugliness” of the greenhouses and the negative image of plastic. Farmers who are compliant and who invest in immigrant housing, sustainable practices, and attractive farms resent the devaluation of their image and the resulting economic impact [82]. Other cracks in the community identity can be seen between “agroecological” farmers, and conventional and large-scale organic farmers.

Efforts to understand these phenomena and to get a better sense of competing interests and narratives prompted a multi actor participatory workshop held at the University of Almeria with the participation of the agricultural sector representatives, public administrations, scientists, farmers, cooperative presidents, cooperative credit, ecologists, economists, etc. The outcomes of the workshop were published in 2019 [38]. What was evident and not expected in the conclusions was the emphasis and near agreement on gaps in civil society.

Although the workshop’s goal was to arrive at a consensus of Almeria’s shared challenges, and actions to be taken thereafter, themes related to social capital, civil society, and the role of cooperatives arose. A lack of a “culture of shared responsibility for governance in the transition to social-economic-environmental sustainability” was identified. It was noted that moving to sustainable governance model requires the creation of new spaces based on social learning and co-creation, instead of the negotiation of individual interests and preferences [83]. It was also found that regulatory non-compliance was tolerated by government local and regional administrations, and that while this non-compliance could be seen to benefit small farmers in the short term, Almeria’s society, including but not limited to farmers, would be harmed in the long term. Also, the urgent need for civil society to understand the interdependent relationship between greenhouse horticulture and conservation of local natural resources and to deal with the failure to value biodiversity and the direct and indirect benefits it provides to the community, was noted as being part of a pending responsibility of the cooperative sector.

As referred to above, immigration and migrants without legal resident status has become an issue which is no longer possible to ignore in Almeria (although it is important to keep the distinction clear: the majority of immigrant farm workers are legally resident and their wages governed under collective agreements; migrants without legal status are not allowed to work and often live in shanty towns next to the agricultural areas, trying to pick up sporadic and illegal work where possible). As indicated, due to the expansion of greenhouse agriculture, where family labor is no longer sufficient, Almeria has received many immigrants to work in the greenhouses, warehouses, packaging plants, etc. Figure 2 above demonstrates the drastic rise in immigration since the liberalization of trade, which caused the rise in exports. While the Spanish state grants access to education and public services to both legally resident immigrants and migrants without legal status, it has not taken responsibility for the migrant crisis, and the attitudes of the Spanish agricultural sector, the media, and the emergence of a populist political party in the province are seen to contribute to the failure to integrate and fully include the migrant population [38]. The view in the agricultural sector that these problems are not their responsibility signifies an important gap in the response of civil society entities to promote social inclusion, particularly in light of public authority inaction.

Technical and social innovation are closely tied to the socio-economic and ecosystem impact of technology advances in Almeria. The possibility to deal with technology and data issues has also been seen as a potential business opportunity as well as a civil society issue, where priorities include initiatives to close the “digital divide” and address the “rural penalty” in ICT (Information and Communication Technologies) where infrastructure is often sub-optimum. Moreover, a de-risking adoption and experimentation of agricultural data through cooperative testing facilities or university research centers has also been called for. A new form of data commons has been discussed within the agricultural sector in relation to the experimental pilots in the pan-European project Internet of Food and Farm IoF2020 [84], where the aggregate of all members’ data creates value for the collective. At this date, the combined lack of awareness and trust on this issue and the fact that cooperatives are very protective of their own farmer and cooperative data has not allowed further sufficient cooperative involvement in this area, although private companies have found market opportunities.

Finally, the fact that women have been effectively excluded in having a meaningful role in the governance of the agricultural sector has not been addressed sufficiently by cooperatives or civil society. Forty-four years after the end of the demise of the Sección Femenina, the representation of women in cooperatives is in single digit percentages, although perhaps they are better represented in the public sector. An association of women cooperativists (*GEA de mujeres socias cooperativistas agroalimentarias de Almeria*), mainly from the oldest cooperative, CASI, have recently self-organized to promote the presence of women in representative roles, boards, panels, and positions of management. The first year was spent on consciousness raising, the second year on education for women to prepare for being board members, and the third year dedicated to election campaigns [85]. But women farmers, who represent 30% of cooperative members, only represent 2.3% of second tier cooperative board positions and 3.8% of first tier cooperative boards. With respect to technical management positions, women occupy 16%, and in case of employee positions, occupy far more part time positions [86]. The digital divide affects all of Almeria, but women even more so.

4. Conclusions

The cooperative movement described above began during a dictatorship, a regime which had decimated a large proportion of its citizens through inept economic policies and cruel political repression. Almeria was a wasteland, people had migrated out, there was little sense of civil society or cultural community and a profound distrust of basic institutions such as the State and the Church. The case study, taking as a starting point the dilemma of how civil society is created from non-existent or very weak social capital, has illustrated that cooperatives were able to build up both bonding and bridging social capital and that they fulfilled a central institutional role in the contribution to a civil society in a population left vulnerable by an economically and politically repressive regime.

Historical social, environmental, and economic institutional deficiencies which resulted from the Franco Regime have been explored as well as negative and destructive social capital. Other authors, as noted above, have studied the inability of other regions to recover from such processes of repression and negative social capital [28,29] yet the cooperative institutions in Almeria have been able to do so. The Almeria cooperative movement operated in “unnoticed” spaces, leveraged existing institutional structures from the Franco Regime, and created a civil society network. Through the building of this network, social capital was created, resulting in a dynamic and virtuous circle of activity. Arguably, it is difficult to determine whether bridging capital was based on strong or weak ties, or both in Almeria. First, strong ties had to be created in a dynamic process through cooperative membership and cooperative institution building. In the beginning, community ties, including family ties, were actually quite weak, given the fragmented nature of the Almeria post war population.

The cooperative movement also created a community of farmers that, by virtue of being part of a cooperative business model increasingly based on “strong ties,” resulted in a development model that was not founded only on resource extraction, as was the case of the resettlement program of the National Institute for Colonization during Franco’s time, but one that required sustainable solutions. Put bluntly, if the cooperative institutions do not find sustainable solutions, then the agricultural system and economy would cease to exist. Much progress has been made [39], examples of which include the association of cooperatives recently opening an agroecology department, in addition to its various research initiatives on sustainable agriculture, biodiversity, agricultural waste and plastics, nutrition, and inclusion initiatives for both women and immigrants. Immigrant greenhouse owners are rare, but present. The cooperative bank is involved in research on the circular economy and various agricultural cooperatives have started their own research and development departments researching mainly sustainability issues. Local cooperative actors and the University of Almeria have started the AlmeriaSmartAgriHub to accelerate the digitization of agriculture. Women cooperativists have begun to organize in the last years, with an eye on board seats, but also with a view to cleave closer to sustainable models. In a study on improving water use in Almeria farms, women were found to be more innovative [40]. The cooperative business model has been fundamental in finding more sustainable solutions, where many sustainable farming practices are more knowledge based than product based. Examples include biological control to reduce pests and pesticides; improving soil by composting and reducing the use of fertilizers, aggregating cooperative member farm data to improve decision making. Cooperative knowledge systems are non-profit extracting business models, emphasizing more benefits for farmers as opposed to cost reduction of production inherent in a corporate business model. The cooperative network encourages knowledge networks which support increasingly sustainable practices.

This case study leads us to re-examine the notion of social and territorial capital as a basis for cooperative development and civil society. The civil society had to be created, and the sense of cooperative community built up in Almeria had more to do with the practice of equitable economic activity, at least at the beginning, rather than any particular “embeddedness” in the pre-existing social fabric, territory, or culture. Absent weak and strong ties, social capital was built at all levels, starting with the establishment of a community of farmers. Hence, cooperatives played an important role in defining and building the community, and not the reverse.

However, the now entrenched cooperative community and the strong ties amongst farmer members, has created its own gaps in civil society response and action. We can see that what is positive social capital may reconvert into negative social capital for disenfranchised or excluded groups, such as immigrants, women, and citizens in general who care about their ecosystem, biodiversity, and environmental issues. Challenges which lay ahead for cooperatives that have created a strong civil society consist in exploring which groups are the new generation of outsiders and which sustainable cooperative solutions remain to be crafted.

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