

Mandatory shifts in participatory food cooperatives

Members' experiences and perceptions

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Participatory food cooperatives aim to make sustainable food more affordable by requiring their members to complete a few hours of unpaid work every month, thus reducing labor costs. Although existing literature on cooperatives has given much attention to members' motivation to participate, it remains limited regarding participation through mandatory shifts. Literature on volunteering, on the other hand, emphasizes how feelings of obligation can adversely affect motivation. Additionally, some scholars express concern about two particular paradoxes in the model of participatory food cooperatives: the exclusionary character of the shifts and their unintended macro consequences. This study draws upon this existing literature and uses data from 18 in-depth interviews with members of participatory food cooperatives in Flanders and Brussels to explore members' motivations and perceptions, as well as the paradoxes in the model. The findings highlight the importance of collectivistic motivations, especially the sense of community and ownership members felt. The mandatory shifts appeared to strengthen this motivation as they oblige members to stay involved or offer stepping stones towards more engagement. While members acknowledged the paradoxes of the model, such as the exclusionary character, most members remained in favor of the mandatory shifts as they see these shifts as a crucial element of what makes their membership valuable. This study contributes to existing literature by offering a better understanding of how members experience mandatory forms of participation and by exploring members' attitudes towards the ethical dimension of participatory food cooperatives.

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1 Introduction

Current food production has a large negative impact on our environment as it causes greenhouse gas emissions, deforestation, and water pollution (Zamuz et al., 2021). To limit this negative impact, food consumption needs to become more sustainable (Verain et al., 2012). More consumers seem to be concerned about this topic, as consumer demand for sustainable food is growing (Zamuz et al., 2021). However, price might be a barrier for some consumers who value and want to purchase sustainable food (Verain et al., 2012). Food cooperatives could offer a solution to this problem, as they often offer sustainable food at lower prices (Camargo Benavides & Ehrenhard, 2021; Jochnowitz, 2001).

The term 'food cooperative' refers to a consumer cooperative in the food retail sector striving for additional ethical or social values, such as promoting sustainable food, community building and social justice (González, 2025). Cooperatives are a special kind of enterprise, based on social values such as self-help, democracy, equality and solidarity (ICA, 2025). Cooperatives are set up to meet a common need of their members instead of profit-maximization for shareholders (Novkovic, 2008). The members of a cooperative are at the same time users and owners of the organization and govern their cooperative democratically (Camargo Benavides & Ehrenhard, 2021). In the case of consumer cooperatives, these members are the main consumers. They organize themselves in a cooperative in order to realize shared goals related to access, affordability, and reliable supply of the goods and services (Pestoff et al., 2016).

Food cooperatives can offer sustainable food at more favorable conditions, because the model of a consumer cooperative allows them to minimize retail margins and to internalize the profit of the distribution process (Camargo Benavides & Ehrenhard, 2021; Zamagni, 2012). In 'participatory' food cooperatives, another factor that contributes to the affordability of the products is the requirement of mandatory shifts: unpaid, voluntary work that members must contribute on a regular basis (Jochnowitz, 2001). These mandatory shifts can be viewed as a specific form of 'member participation', a concept that generally describes how members are engaged in democratic decision-making concerning their cooperative (Birchall, 1999).

To understand what drives members to participate in these mandatory shifts, this thesis draws on two complementary motivational frameworks. The Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provides a first lens, distinguishing between intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. The former means engaging in an activity because it is inherently enjoyable or satisfying, while the latter involves performing an activity for a separable outcome. Different forms of extrinsic motivation can be put on a spectrum from purely external regulation to more internalized forms (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Crucially, SDT theorizes that more

internalized motivations are generally associated with greater well-being and sustained engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Sheldon et al., 2023). A second framework, the Mutual Incentives Theory (MIT) and its associated Participation Chain (Birchall & Simmons, 2004), is specifically designed to explain member participation in cooperatives. MIT combines individualistic incentives, such as material benefits and learning opportunities, with collectivistic incentives, such as shared goals, shared values and a sense of community. The Participation Chain adds that participation is also shaped by members' prior resources and by mobilization efforts. Together, SDT and MIT offer a theoretical lens through which members' motivations for participation, and mandatory shifts in particular, can be analyzed.

To complement these frameworks, insights from volunteering research outside the cooperative sector are drawn upon. Gallant et al. (2017) distinguish between two dimensions of feelings of obligation to volunteer. The first, 'Obligation to Volunteer as Commitment' (OVC), bears positive connotations. The second, 'Obligation to Volunteer as Duty' (OVD), generally reflects a more burdensome experience. Additionally, empirical studies on mandatory volunteering report that the compulsory element can undermine volunteer motivation, continuance intention, and well-being (Cho et al., 2023; Geiser et al., 2014), aligning with more externalized motivations on the SDT spectrum. However, the cooperative context may be distinct: empirical studies suggest that members experience work requirements as aligned with their identity as co-owners, implying that the mandatory aspect may be interpreted in a more internalized way (Huber & Brown, 2017; Huber & Knights, 2023).

Members' motivations are, however, not shaped in a vacuum. Practical and ethical considerations surrounding the mandatory shifts may equally influence how members experience them. On the practical level, the high member turnover inherent to the shift system can reduce operational efficiency (Sanz-Cañada et al., 2024). On a broader ethical level, two paradoxes emerge. First, while mandatory shifts keep prices low and foster community cohesion, they simultaneously risk excluding individuals who cannot afford to dedicate unpaid time (Zitcer, 2015). Second, although participatory food cooperatives aim to challenge the existing food system, they may inadvertently reinforce neoliberal structures by relying on voluntary contributions and consumer choice (Guthman, 2008).

Despite these theoretical insights, empirical research on how members of participatory food cooperatives actually experience mandatory shifts remains scarce. Existing empirical studies either focus on member participation in cooperatives more broadly (Birchall & Simmons, 2004), without addressing the specific dynamics of mandatory labor, or rely on ethnographic accounts that highlight individual experiences without systematically applying established motivational frameworks (Huber & Brown, 2017; Huber & Knights, 2023). This

thesis aims to address this gap by investigating the following research question: "*How do members of participatory food cooperatives perceive mandatory member labor and the tensions this form of participation entails?*"

To address this research question, an exploratory qualitative research design is employed. Primary data consist of semi-structured interviews with members of three participatory food cooperatives in Flanders and Brussels: Coop Centraal, Bab'l Market, and BEEScoop. In total, 17 interviews are conducted with a variety of member profiles, including more and less actively involved members, and a daily manager. The interviews focus on members' motivations to participate, their personal experience of the mandatory shifts, and their views on the practical and ethical aspects of the shift system.

The remainder of this thesis is structured as follows. The literature review first introduces cooperatives in general and participatory food cooperatives in particular, before discussing member participation and motivations in cooperatives and mandatory volunteering. It then turns to the practical and ethical aspects surrounding mandatory shifts, culminating in the theoretical framework that guides this study. The methodology section subsequently describes the research design, sampling strategy, and data collection and analysis procedures. The results section presents the empirical findings, organized around members' motivations, their experience of the mandatory shifts, and the practical and ethical considerations that shape that experience. Finally, the discussion reflects on the scientific contribution of this study, its limitations, and recommendations for future research and practitioners.

2 Literature review

2.1 Introduction to food cooperatives

2.1.1 Cooperatives in general

The modern understanding of cooperatives is anchored in the International Cooperative Alliance's (ICA) Statement on the Cooperative Identity (Camargo Benavides & Ehrenhard, 2021; Novkovic, 2008; Polo-Garrido & Fouché, 2025). This statement defines a cooperative as “an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise” (ICA, 2025).

In addition to this definition, the ICA formulates seven cooperative principles that guide how cooperatives should put this definition into practice: voluntary and open membership; democratic member control; member economic participation; autonomy and independence; education, training, and information; cooperation among cooperatives; and concern for the community (ICA, 2025). Although these principles are internationally recognized, they are not legally binding and their application varies because of the considerable diversity in sector- and country-specific contexts amongst cooperatives (Siedlok et al., 2025).

Despite this diversity, most cooperatives have two characteristics in common: member ownership and democratic control (Novkovic, 2008; Siedlok et al., 2025). Member ownership means that cooperatives are enterprises owned and controlled by users, with members acting simultaneously as beneficiaries and decision makers (Camargo Benavides & Ehrenhard, 2021). Democratic control is expressed in different ways in cooperative enterprises, but often includes mechanisms such as the 'one member, one vote' principle, which ensures that influence on decision-making does not depend on capital contributions (Birchall, 2010). This is in stark contrast to investor-owned companies, where voting rights usually correspond to stock ownership and where maximizing shareholder value is the priority (Birchall, 2012).

2.1.2 Consumer cooperatives in the food sector

A commonly used framework to classify cooperatives relies on the nature of the relationship between members and the cooperative and distinguishes four main types: producer cooperatives, worker cooperatives, consumer cooperatives, and multi-stakeholder cooperatives (Birchall, 2012; ILO, 2020; Pestoff et al., 2016; Vieta et al., 2016). Consumer cooperatives are composed of members who use the cooperative's goods or services (ILO,

2020). Ownership and democratic control are thus in the hands of the main consumers (Camargo Benavides & Ehrenhard, 2021). Their shared interests typically relate to access, affordability, and reliable supply (Pestoff et al., 2016). Consumer cooperatives exist in different sectors, among which the food retail sector. Next to commonly known retail cooperatives that often present themselves much like for-profit supermarkets (Puusa & Saastamoinen, 2023), the so-called food cooperatives as a part of Alternative Food Networks (AFNs) have emerged (Sanz-Cañada et al., 2024). AFNs encompass a wide range of producer and consumer initiatives that challenge the mainstream food system, often emphasizing different qualities like local production (Goszczyński & Śpiewak, 2023).

In that regard, food cooperatives often strive for social and ethical values, such as promoting sustainable food, community building and social justice (González, 2025). One exemplary food cooperative is the Park Slope Food Coop in New York, which was founded in 1973 (Jochowitz, 2001). This cooperative sells local and organic food at affordable prices. Only members can shop there, and they have to complete a 2.75-hour shift every six weeks (Park Slope Food Coop, 2025). The shifts keep prices low and create equality: everyone has to work, even those who would be willing to pay a higher price (Jochowitz, 2001). This model of mandatory shifts can now be found in many other food cooperatives around the world (González, 2025). In this thesis, the term participatory food cooperative will be used when referring to this specific type of cooperative.

In existing literature, the practice of requiring members to complete shifts is described using a wide range of terms. Authors refer, among others, to mandatory member labor (Zitcer, 2015), compulsory work shifts (Sanz-Cañada et al., 2024), member labor contributions (Ashforth & Reingen, 2014), and owner-volunteer programs (Levinson & Eisenback, 2019). In this thesis, the term mandatory shifts will be used when referring to this concept.

Participatory food cooperatives bring different benefits to their members. As consumer demand for sustainable food is growing (Zamuz et al., 2021), food cooperatives offer their members a way to meet this need (Jarosz, 2008). They are able to offer this food at relatively low prices thanks to their organizational form and the mandatory shifts (Camargo Benavides & Ehrenhard, 2021; Jochowitz, 2001). In addition, food cooperatives foster a sense of community and can re-connect the consumers to the production process (González, 2025). The challenges faced due to the system of mandatory shifts will be explored in section 2.3, after discussing member participation and motivations in general.

2.2 Participation and motivation in cooperatives

2.2.1 Forms of member participation

As member ownership and democratic control are at the core of the cooperative model (Novkovic, 2008; Siedlok et al., 2025), participation of these members is crucial for the functioning of a cooperative (Puusa & Saastamoinen, 2023). This member participation encompasses a wide array of dimensions, as exemplified by Birchall (1999), who distinguishes three interrelated forms of participation. These types are (a) taking part in decision-making, (b) engaging in the cooperative's social life, and (c) carrying out tasks that further the cooperative's aims. Participation in decision-making encompasses democratic activities such as attending annual general meetings, being a candidate for the board of directors, or serving on committees and working groups. Social participation encompasses activities that foster community and belonging, such as attending a summer bar organized by the cooperative or joining a member film night. Task-related participation, finally, refers to, among others, voluntary work that supports the cooperative's operations (Birchall, 1999). A recent study of Pesci et al. (2025) echoes this broad spectrum, as it uses six different dimensions to measure participation in a cooperative: meeting attendance, active involvement in meetings, fostering discussions, contributing to social and to economic goals of the cooperative and time contribution (Pesci et al., 2025). Within this broad spectrum, the mandatory shifts mainly classify as task-related participation, contributing to the economic goals and contributing time to the cooperative.

Interestingly, Brown (1985) emphasizes that there are also informal ways of participating in decision-making. She describes how members who work as volunteers for the cooperative could give their input to the coordinators in an informal setting which informs the policy decisions in the cooperative (Brown, 1985). This argument reveals that the mandatory shifts can also be a form of participating in the decision-making process, albeit informally.

2.2.2 Motivations of members in cooperatives

To understand the motivations behind members' engagement in these various forms of participation, particularly mandatory shifts, we combine insights from two theoretical frameworks. First, the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) offers understanding of motivation in general (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2020). Second, the Mutual Incentives Theory (MIT) and the associated Participation Chain provides a framework to specifically analyze member participation in cooperatives (Birchall & Simmons, 2004).

2.2.2.1 Self-Determination Theory

The Self-Determination Theory (SDT) distinguishes between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Table 2.1) (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2020). Intrinsic motivation refers to engaging in an activity because it is inherently enjoyable or satisfying. Extrinsic motivation, by contrast, involves performing an activity for a separable outcome and ranges from more external forms (e.g., compliance with rules or avoidance of sanctions) to more internalized forms (e.g., recognizing the value of the activity) (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Generally, the more internal motivations, whether intrinsic or internalized extrinsic, are experienced when the three basic psychological needs, autonomy, competence and relatedness, are fulfilled (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Research consistently shows that these internal motivations are associated with greater well-being, sustained engagement, and stronger continuance intentions than more externally driven motivations (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Sheldon et al., 2023).

Table 2.1: Self-Determination Theory's (SDT) Taxonomy of Motivation. Motivation can be intrinsic or extrinsic. Extrinsic motivations can be sub-divided into four types, from external to internal. Fulfilment of the three basic needs (autonomy, competence and relatedness) is associated with more internalized motivations, which are generally seen as having a higher quality. Adapted from Ryan & Deci (2020).

Regulatory style	Description	Perceived locus of causality
External regulation (extrinsic)	The individual is driven by external demands, rewards or punishments	External
Introjection (extrinsic)	The individual is driven by internal pressures (e.g., guilt, shame, pride)	Somewhat external
Identification (extrinsic)	The individual is driven by alignment with their values	Somewhat internal
Integration (extrinsic)	The individual is driven by alignment with their whole identity	Internal
Intrinsic motivation	The individual is driven by inherent enjoyment, interest or satisfaction	Internal

2.2.2.2 Mutual Incentives Theory

To explain member participation specifically in cooperatives, Birchall and Simmons present their Mutual Incentives Theory (MIT). This theory includes both an individualistic and a collectivistic approach to motivation.

First, the individualistic approach (Table 2.2) posits that individual rewards and punishments motivate members to participate. Two individualistic incentives have a positive effect: habit and benefits. These benefits can be either external or internal. The

remaining three incentives have a negative effect on participation: direct costs, opportunity costs and satiation (Birchall & Simmons, 2004).

Table 2.2: Mutual Incentives Theory's (MIT) individualistic incentives. These incentives can have a positive or negative effect on members' motivation to participate in the cooperative. Adapted from Birchall & Simmons (2004).

Individualistic incentive	Description	Effect
Habits	Tendency to continue participating based on past behavior (e.g., routinely attending general meetings)	Positive
External benefits	Material rewards gained from participating (e.g., discounts)	Positive
Internal benefits	Subjective rewards gained from participating (e.g., learning opportunities)	Positive
Direct costs	Personal burdens associated with participating (e.g., effort, social discomfort)	Negative
Opportunity costs	Other activities foregone by choosing to participate (e.g., time that could have been spent elsewhere)	Negative
Satiation	Perceived value of participation diminishes over time (e.g., long-term members feeling membership no longer adds anything new)	Negative

Second, the collectivistic approach focuses on three variables, which all increase participation (Table 2.3): shared goals, shared values, and sense of community (Birchall & Simmons, 2004).

Table 2.3: Mutual Incentives Theory's (MIT) collectivistic incentives. These incentives all have a positive on member's motivation to participate in the cooperative. Adapted from Birchall & Simmons (2004).

Collectivistic incentive	Description	Effect
Shared goals	Goals that originate from mutual needs	Positive
Shared values	A sense of duty to participate as an expression of common values	Positive
Sense of community	A sense of identification with and care for fellow members	Positive

2.2.2.3 Participation Chain

According to Birchall and Simmons (2004), the two different types of incentives of MIT are insufficient to fully explain member participation. They thus present the Participation Chain.

This model consists of three levels, the 'links' in the chain: prior resources, mobilization and motivations. The level of prior resources points to the means, like time, money and skills, that members need to participate. The level of mobilization addresses factors that influence the process in which non-participants become participants, such as attractive participation opportunities and recruitment efforts. Finally, the level of motivations refers to the different factors of MIT. The chain metaphor illustrates that cooperatives should focus on making all three links stronger and align them to strengthen participation (Birchall & Simmons, 2004).

The levels of the Participation Chain are implicitly linked to the fulfillment of the three basic psychological needs as positioned by SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000). First, the need for relatedness explains why collectivistic incentives motivate members: by participating in shifts or general meetings, members interact with each other and strengthen their sense of belonging. Second, the resources, particularly skills needed to, for example, read yearly accounts, relate to competence. To best meet this need, there should be an optimal level of challenge (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Third, autonomy is present in the choices members can make about their participation, like choosing which type of shift they complete or which working group they join. These choices depend on the opportunities offered by the cooperative.

2.2.3 Empirical studies on member participation

2.2.3.1 Motivations

Studies confirm that both individualistic and collectivistic incentives drive members to participate in cooperatives. For example, Sacchi et al. (2022) find that members in a food cooperative are motivated by individual 'material benefits', such as the convenience of a broad assortment sustainable food at more accessible prices. At the same time, they also report collectivistic incentives like the enjoyment brought by the sense of belonging they experience in the cooperative and the participation at community level.

Other studies emphasize that collectivistic motivations are the main driver of member participation in cooperatives. A study of Birchall and Simmons (2004) finds that most participants have a strong sense of community, and the majority considers benefits for the group as a whole to be more important than individual benefits. The study thus concludes that the collectivistic incentives outweigh the individualistic incentives for most participants (Birchall & Simmons, 2004). These results are confirmed by Sanz-Cañada et al. (2024), who find that members join a participatory food cooperative because they value responsible consumption. In the terms of MIT the members are thus mainly motivated by collectivistic incentives, particularly shared values (Birchall & Simmons, 2004).

The findings of Pesci et al. (2025) nuance this emphasis on the collectivistic incentives. This study finds, paradoxically, that members with a strong self-identification with

cooperative values (collectivistic incentive) participate less actively in decision-making than members who indicate that they particularly value the economic benefits (individualistic incentive). According to the authors, this finding demonstrates the risk that the social mission of the cooperative could erode (Pesci et al., 2025). The case study of Ashforth and Reingen (2014) puts this risk in perspective, illustrating that a tension between more pragmatic and more idealist members can lead to a positive outcome as the presence of both perspectives in the decision-making creates a functioning balance.

Although not emphasized by the authors, the study of Pesci et al. (2025) confirms previous findings that the motivations to join and participate in a cooperative are not the same for all members. Lecuyer et al. (2022) observe that while some members of a financial cooperative are driven by collectivistic incentives, others attach more value to individualistic incentives. In his study on renewable energy cooperatives, Bauwens (2016) finds that some members are norm-driven and act based on their environmental beliefs or the sense of community, while others are more interested in the material benefits. According to Bauwens (2016) the former category of members invests more and participates more in the governance. This seems to contradict the findings of Pesci et al. (2025), who conclude that members driven by economic benefits participate more actively in decision-making.

2.2.3.2 Resources and mobilization

As mentioned, to fully explain member participation, the Participation Chain with the role of resources and mobilization should also be considered (Birchall & Simmons, 2004).

First, regarding resources, empirical studies highlight the role of skills and experience. For example, Birchall and Simmons (2004) conclude that confidence and skills from prior experience in a similar organization are important resources for participants. Interestingly, these skills are not linked to an educational qualification (Birchall & Simmons, 2004). Another resource, time, also has an influence on member participation, though Birchall and Simmons (2004) find that a 'lack of time' only becomes a barrier when the time commitment increases, for example, when members consider standing for election to higher governance levels.

Ranville (2025) builds on the Participation Chain by examining how different resources interact for members in energy cooperatives. Her study finds that having more free time can compensate for a lack of skills or experience. Having more social capital can also have this compensating effect, as it facilitates transfer of information. Conversely, the author also finds an active group of 'expert' members, who have less time, but indicate to be skilled and experienced (Ranville, 2025).

Second, regarding mobilization, Birchall and Simmons (2004) find that face-to-face recruitment is more effective than written methods. Beyond recruitment, it is equally

important to offer members a sufficient variety of ways to participate and to communicate these opportunities clearly (Birchall & Simmons, 2004).

Together, these findings illustrate how the Participation Chain plays out in practice in cooperatives. In the specific context of shifts in participatory food cooperatives, however, mobilization becomes less relevant as a distinct factor: because shifts are mandatory, the obligation itself effectively functions as the mobilizing force. This shifts the focus towards resources and motivations as the key factors shaping how members experience the mandatory shifts, and what tensions this may create. These tensions are explored in the following section.

2.3 Tensions within participatory food cooperatives

2.3.1 Tensions arising from the mandatory nature of the shifts

At the micro level, tensions could arise as some members of participatory food cooperatives find the pressure created by strict enforcement of work requirements excessive (Huber & Knights, 2023). This experience could possibly even alienate them from the cooperative (Ain, 2009). Given that the mandatory shifts are often classified as volunteer work (ILO, 2020), insights from the wider volunteer literature and from studies on mandatory forms of volunteering offer an interesting starting point to explore these tensions.

In their study on feelings of obligation to volunteer, Gallant et al. (2017) distinguish between two distinct dimensions of obligation. The first dimension, 'Obligation to Volunteer as a Commitment' (OVC) bears rather positive connotations. It is associated with the rewards gained by volunteering, the affective attachment to the goal or organization, the flexibility to choose how responsibilities are filled in, and the peripheral benefits related to the volunteering activity. The second dimension, 'Obligation to Volunteer as a Duty' (OVD), suggests a more negative experience of volunteering, as this dimension encompasses the constraints and burdens related to the volunteering activity, and the expectations of oneself and others. These expectations refer to a sense of pressure to act in accordance with normative ideals and may originate from oneself or others (Gallant et al., 2017).

The study of Gallant et al. (2017) reveals two interesting aspects about those expectations. First, the expectations of oneself appear to be the most salient. They explain this by referring to the concept of introjected regulation of SDT: the behavior is driven by internal pressures such as guilt, shame or the desire to avoid disappointing oneself (Gallant et al., 2017). Second, for some volunteers, those expectations of oneself are more closely related to obligation as a commitment, even though the authors conceptually classify expectations under the dimension of obligation as a duty. This could be the case when volunteers

embrace these expectations that are often related to their personal values and consequently do not experience the expectations as constraining or burdensome (Gallant et al., 2017).

In addition to this concept of OVD, research on mandatory volunteering, such as school-based or government-mandated programs, offers deeper insights for contexts in which participation is required rather than freely chosen. Early work shows that external pressures can shift the source of motivation from the individual to the environment, reducing the likelihood that the behavior will be sustained once the pressure is removed (Clary & Snyder, 1999). More recent studies support this claim: compulsory volunteering can undermine volunteer motivation, continuance intention, and well-being (Cho et al., 2023; Geiser et al., 2014). These findings are consistent with SDT, that suggests that more external motivations are a maladaptive form of motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Wu & Li, 2019).

Although these insights on motivations are valuable, they cannot simply be applied in different settings. The cooperative context is distinct from these types of programs: members of cooperatives are also co-owners with built-in incentives, responsibilities, and collective identity commitments that shape how mandatory shifts are experienced.

Ethnographic studies food cooperatives in the U.S. reflect this distinction: members describe joining the cooperative as a deliberate choice to become part of a community (Huber & Brown, 2017) and emphasize that, even considering mandatory shift requirements, their participation feels self-chosen and meaningful (Huber & Knights, 2023). From an SDT perspective, it could be implied that food cooperative members may have stronger internal motivations, potentially buffering them against some of the negative effects associated with externally imposed volunteering.

2.3.2 Practical tensions

Next to individual considerations and preferences, tensions at the meso level also shape the experience of the mandatory shifts for members. One practical tension discussed in literature is that the mandatory shifts lead to a high employee turnover, as members only work some hours each month, which could diminish the efficiency of the organization (Sanz-Cañada et al., 2024).

2.3.3 Ethical paradoxes

Beyond such practical concerns, the system of mandatory shifts also gives rise to ethical paradoxes, operating both at the meso and macro level.

The most salient meso level tension relates to the cooperative principle of voluntary and open membership. This core cooperative principle explicitly rejects social or economic

discrimination (ICA, 2025). Different authors however disagree on the actual impact of mandatory shifts. At first sight, the model of mandatory shifts could be seen as a measure to facilitate inclusion. By requiring all members to contribute their labor, cooperatives can keep prices low and make sustainable food more broadly accessible (Jochnowitz, 2001). In addition, the system is attributed the potential to increase community cohesion (Brown, 1985). However, the requirement that makes food more affordable presupposes that everyone can complete these mandatory shifts. As Zitcer (2015) argues, these mandatory shifts risk excluding individuals who cannot afford to dedicate unpaid time, such as lower-income individuals or single parents.

This argument becomes stronger when looking at empirical evidence. Despite their open membership, food cooperatives still have an exclusionary character, as in reality members need social, economic or cultural capital to be able to participate (Bilewicz & Śpiewak, 2015). Consequently, food cooperatives' members' socioeconomic profile usually remains limited to individuals with a medium or high income and a high level of education (Sanz-Cañada et al., 2024). Likewise, other studies find that food cooperatives face challenges in attracting and retaining people of color and those with lower incomes (Povitz, 2019; Zitcer, 2015). This seems to be a more general problem within AFNs, as literature highlights that these initiatives disproportionately attract white and higher-class participants (Goszczyński & Śpiewak, 2023; Turkkan, 2023) and can become exclusionary despite their well-meaning intentions towards enhanced inclusion (Slocum, 2007).

At the macro level, some authors go further and question the transformative impact of the participatory food cooperative model. Vastenaekels and Pelenc (2018), for example, notice that in a participatory food cooperative, the relationship between producers and consumers can remain purely commercial. Producers and consumers then still interact as sellers and buyers, creating a competitive environment for producers which puts pressure on the prices (Vastenaekels & Pelenc, 2018). More broadly, Guthman (2008) states that the four recurring themes in food activism (consumer choice, localism, entrepreneurship, and self-improvement) can themselves be understood as neoliberal values. Therefore, these initiatives, including cooperatives, may reinforce structural problems surrounding access to good food in a neoliberal society, rather than challenge them (Guthman, 2008).

These ethical paradoxes are further complicated by the fact that food cooperatives bring together members with different orientations: some are primarily driven by pragmatic, economic concerns, while others are more ideologically oriented, prioritizing the cooperative's social mission (Pesci et al., 2025). Finding the balance between these perspectives is an inherent challenge for any food cooperative (Ashforth & Reingen, 2014).

2.4 Literature gap and research question

As the existing literature reveals, participatory food cooperatives employ a unique participation model centered on mandatory shifts, which makes understanding member participation in this context particularly interesting. The Participation Chain suggests that participation is shaped by three links: motivations, resources, and mobilization (Birchall & Simmons, 2004). As the shifts are mandatory, mobilization is less relevant, but members' motivations and resources are central to understand how they experience this obligation.

Previous research through the lens of motivation theories such as SDT and MIT suggests that active cooperative members typically have strong collectivistic motivations (Birchall & Simmons, 2004; Sanz-Cañada et al., 2024), which could be interpreted as more internalized. At the same time, literature on mandatory volunteer work points to the risk that external obligations can undermine this motivation. Gallant et al. (2017) nuances this risk: whether the obligation undermines motivation depends on members experiencing this obligation as a 'commitment' or a 'duty'. Integrating these insights offers a useful theoretical lens: motivations as described by SDT and MIT can be linked to 'commitment' or 'expectations' (the sub-dimension of 'duty' that seems correlated with 'commitment') (Table 2.4), while (a lack of) resources can be linked to other sub-dimensions of 'duty'.

Table 2.4: Motivations associated with mandatory shifts in participatory food cooperatives (own synthesis). In this synthesis, we limited the focus to the factors that appeared most prominent across the discussed literature. Each factor is connected to the relevant theoretical frameworks (SDT – Self Determination Theory; MIT – Mutual Incentives Theory, OVC – Obligation to Volunteer as Commitment, OVD – Obligation to Volunteer as Duty) and to the sources that identify this factor as influencing participation in cooperatives.

Description	Factor	Theoretical grounding	Empirical findings
Mandatory shifts reduce labor costs, allowing food to be sold at more affordable prices	External benefits	MIT: part of individualistic incentives SDT: external regulation OVC: rewards	(Bauwens, 2016; Lecuyer et al., 2022; Pesci et al., 2025; Sacchi et al., 2022)
Members get learning opportunities from working in the cooperative	Internal benefits	MIT: part of individualistic incentives SDT: external regulation OVC: side bets	(Birchall & Simmons, 2004; González, 2025)

Description	Factor	Theoretical grounding	Empirical findings
Members value sustainability and social inclusion, and feel responsible to participate in order to realize these values	Shared values	MIT: part of collectivistic incentives SDT: introjection OVD: expectation	(Birchall & Simmons, 2004; Lecuyer et al., 2022; Sanz-Cañada et al., 2024)
Mandatory shifts reduce prices of sustainable foods, thus making it more accessible for all	Shared goals	MIT: part of collectivistic incentives SDT: identification OVC: affective attachment	(Birchall & Simmons, 2004; Ranville, 2025; Sanz-Cañada et al., 2024)
Working together fosters social bonds and collective identity	Sense of community	MIT: part of collectivistic incentives SDT: need of relatedness OVC: affective attachment	(Birchall & Simmons, 2004; Brown, 1985; González, 2025; Pesci et al., 2025; Sacchi et al., 2022)

Practical and ethical tensions inherent to the model of participatory food cooperatives may also influence members' motivational drivers, and thus how they experience the obligation to complete the mandatory shift. The integration of all aforementioned tensions at micro, meso and macro level leads to the development of a theoretical framework particularly suited for the context of participatory food cooperatives (Figure 2.1).

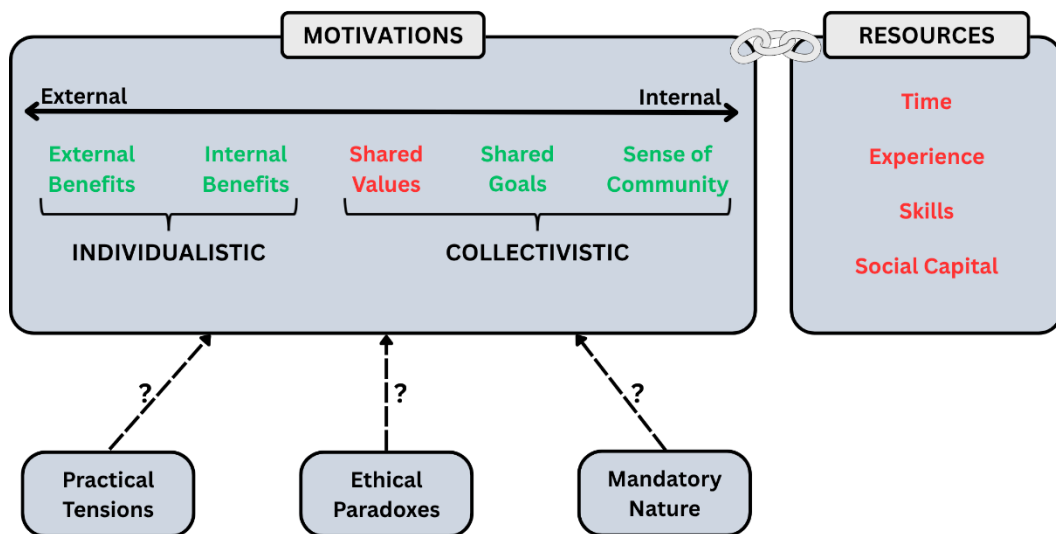


Figure 2.1: Theoretical framework used to study members' experience of mandatory shifts in participatory food cooperatives (authors' extension of the Participation Chain from Birchall & Simmons (2004)).

Two frames distinguish between the two relevant links of the Participation Chain: motivations and resources. The motivations are structured along SDT's external-internal continuum and grouped following the individualistic-collectivistic distinction of MIT. Motivations in green are related to OVC, while motivations/resources in red are related to OVD. The floating frames represent possible tensions surrounding the mandatory shifts, with dashed arrows suggesting that these tensions may influence members' motivations.

Although literature theoretically addresses the tensions that could arise in participatory food cooperatives, empirical insights into how members experience them remain scarce. This thesis takes a first step in addressing this research gap by investigating the question: *"How do members of participatory food cooperatives perceive mandatory shifts and the tensions this form of participation entails?"* through an exploratory qualitative study of food cooperatives in Flanders and Brussels. Exploring this specific context advances cooperative research on participation by examining how a mandatory form of participation shapes members' experiences. Additionally, these insights contribute to a deeper understanding of obligation in volunteering, as well as the meso and macro level challenges of the model from the members' perspective. On a practical level, this empirical research might help participatory food cooperatives to understand their members' perceptions and experiences, and to improve their operations based on these insights.

3 Methodology

3.1 Context description

As discussed in the literature review, participatory food cooperatives are consumer cooperatives in the food retail sector, where members are required to fulfill shifts for the cooperative. These cooperatives often follow the example of the Park Slope Food Coop in New York (Dufays et al., 2019).

This research was conducted in food cooperatives in two Belgian regions: Flanders and Brussels. This location formed an interesting research setting for three reasons. First, contrary to countries like the UK (Ekberg, 2012), Belgium does not have any large cooperative supermarkets (Pestoff et al., 2016). The smaller Belgian food cooperatives are characterized by their aim to make the food system more sustainable and challenge the profit-seeking logic of conventional food retail (Vastenaekels & Pelenc, 2018). As these cooperatives sometimes differ significantly from traditional supermarkets, their members might consciously choose an alternative way of doing their groceries.

Second, Brussels in particular forms a relevant research setting given the documented challenges around accessibility of sustainable food. Hermesse et al. (2023) highlight that despite the growing landscape of sustainable food initiatives in Brussels, lower-income portions of the population remain excluded from alternative food initiatives due to economic, geographic, and cultural barriers. As offering sustainable food at a reasonable price is one of the main goals of participatory food cooperatives, it is interesting to study cooperatives and their members in this region.

Third, there appears to exist a legal grey zone in Belgium regarding mandatory shifts in cooperatives. Cooperatives are enterprises recognized in the Code of Companies and Associations (CCA) and as such, generally not allowed to rely on volunteers (Dufays et al., 2025). Only if the cooperative is recognized as a social enterprise by the National Council for Cooperatives (Nationale Raad voor Coöperaties, NRC) and if the cooperative meets certain criteria, such as not transferring profits or dividends to members, allowing volunteering would be an option (De Hoge Raad voor Vrijwilligers, 2022). The legal framework for volunteering in cooperatives is thus not entirely clear. The mandatory shifts could be considered a kind of volunteering as they are an unpaid, voluntary activity for the benefit of the cooperative (Febecoop, 2018). Most Belgian cooperatives pragmatically navigate this legal challenge.

3.2 Sampling strategy

This research explored how individual members experienced mandatory shifts in food cooperatives, making it primarily a micro level study. However, as will be discussed in section 3.4, certain meso and macro level factors proved relevant during the research process, and were therefore incorporated as well. Since we aimed to capture members' perspectives and understand the context in which those experiences take shape, a qualitative research approach was chosen, as qualitative inquiry is particularly suited to understanding context and capturing people's lived experiences (Patton, 2014).

To select our participants, theoretical sampling (Patton, 2014) was applied in order to ensure an interesting variety of viewpoints. In the first stage, we selected several participatory food cooperatives located in Brussels and Flanders. Out of a list of eligible cooperatives acquired from the website of Le Pédalo, one of the participatory food cooperatives in Brussels (Le Pédalo, 2024), cooperatives of different organizational size and age were contacted to ask whether they were open to participate. Additionally, we excluded cooperatives where members could pay a monthly fee instead of completing a shift. In the end, we cooperated with three cooperatives:

- BEEScoop, the oldest and largest participatory food cooperative of Belgium;
- Bab'l Market, a smaller but established cooperative in Brussels. Although they are legally structured as a non-profit association (vzw), they operate in practice as a cooperative. As of April 2026, they allow their members to pay a monthly fee instead of completing a shift (Bab'l Market, 2026). As we conducted the interviews with the members of Bab'l Market in March, this change did not influence the results;
- Coop Centraal, a smaller and more recently established cooperative in Antwerp

All three organizations gave us permission to disclose their name in this study. In the second stage, we selected a diverse group of individual members using a combination of self-selection and theoretical sampling: after distributing an open call in our cooperatives to identify interested respondents, different member profiles were selected, looking for variation of attributes such as family situation, occupation, and whether they usually attended the general annual meeting of their cooperative. In addition, snowball sampling (Patton, 2014) was employed, as we asked all participants whether they knew other members who would be interested in participating in the study.

3.3 Data Collection

Due to the limited existent empirical research on mandatory shifts in food cooperatives, an exploratory qualitative approach was taken to explore members' experiences and interpretations in depth.

Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview guide was based on insights from literature (Figure 2.1), but interviews remained flexible to capture additional insights from respondents. The interviews mainly focused on members' motivations, their own experiences of and their opinions on the mandatory shifts (see Appendix B: Interview guide).

In total, 18 interviews were carried out: twelve interviews were conducted with members of Coop Centraal, which also included one daily manager. These interviews were supplemented with three interviews with members of Bab'l Market and two interviews with members of BEEScoop. Lastly, an interview with an expert of Febecoop was added to gather insights into the broader context of the shifts within cooperatives. In the case of Coop Centraal and Bab'l Market, participants were recruited through a newsletter call distributed by the cooperative on behalf of the researchers. In the case of BEEScoop, the call was distributed through the personal network of the researchers and snowball sampling. All interviews were conducted between February and April 2026, either online or in person, and lasted approximately one hour each.

In addition, secondary data was collected from analysis of the respective food cooperatives' websites, their bylaws, annual reports if available, newspaper and social media articles and other available written documents on the food cooperatives under study. In the case of Coop Centraal, the website and report of the general assembly of March were consulted. For BEEScoop, the researchers visited the website and one of them followed the introduction session for prospective members in January. Lastly for Bab'l Market the website and bylaws were consulted for additional analyses.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a rather deductive approach (Patton, 2014). Initial coding was informed by concepts from the theoretical frameworks discussed in the literature review (Table 2.4). Simultaneously, the analysis remained open to themes emerging directly from the data, giving room to a more inductive approach.

Throughout the interviews, many respondents touched upon the practical and ethical perspective regarding the mandatory shifts. This led to broadening the scope of the research to include these perspectives as well. However, the micro level remained the main

focus and the meso and macro level were consistently considered from the viewpoint of the individual members.

Interviews were transcribed exactly and analyzed through iterative coding. Open coding was first used to identify recurring themes, followed by axial coding to relate these themes to broader categories. In the final stage, empirical findings were linked back to the theoretical frameworks. This allowed the study to assess how existing theories explain members' experiences of mandatory shifts and identify what future research is needed.

The full coding tree (see Appendix A: Coding table) shows the four most important themes that have emerged throughout the analysis: motivations, resources, practical aspects, and ethical paradoxes. As most interviews were conducted in Dutch, the researchers translated all quotes. We aimed to reproduce participants' wording as faithfully as possible; however, this may occasionally result in phrasing that is less idiomatic in English.

4 Results

4.1 General motivations of cooperative members

Before examining how the mandatory shifts were perceived by the respondents, it is useful to discuss their general motivational profiles to become and remain a member of their cooperative. Interviewees reported individualistic incentives, shared values and goals, and a sense of community as their main motivational drivers. Across the interviews, a clear pattern emerged: individualistic incentives were mostly reported as secondary motivations, while the two collectivistic motivational drivers dominated. This is consistent with the empirical findings of Birchall and Simmons (2004) and Sanz-Cañada et al. (2024). All three drivers are discussed in more detail below.

4.1.1 Individualistic incentives

In addition to dominating collectivistic drivers (discussed in sections 4.1.2 and 4.1.3), many members reported to be motivated, at least to some extent, by individual incentives, specifically benefits. These findings align with MIT's individualistic incentives, which encompasses both external and internal benefits (Birchall & Simmons, 2004; 2024). Several respondents referred to the internal benefit of participating as an opportunity to gain skills and knowledge that are useful beyond the cooperative itself. The range of what members learned varied: some gained practical insight into retail operations, while others developed broader professional competencies. One respondent (CcMeSNcA) even got their job through the cooperative.

Several members also highlighted the practical advantages that membership offers in terms of grocery shopping. For example, some noted that doing groceries at the cooperative is easier because available products are actively selected based on quality and sustainability, so members saved mental space and time they would otherwise spend searching and selecting such products in larger, commercial supermarkets. For one member of BEEScoop (BcMeWCA1) this seemed to be their main motivation as they indicated that it changed their life to be able to buy all their desired healthy and high-quality products nearby. This marked an interesting difference with members of the two smaller cooperatives under study, as most of them explicitly mentioned that their cooperative did not stock all the products they needed.

Besides gaining skills and enjoying convenience, financial advantages through membership played a role for most respondents. This external benefit was explicitly

brought forward by respondents when talking about the lower price of high-quality and ethical products:

It's still organic [...]. You have to compare it with what is comparable, of course. But if you compare it with the same type of products, it's always cheaper (BcMeWCA2)

Interestingly, most interviewees clarified that generally, the price hardly mattered for themselves. What motivated them was rather the contribution their commitment makes to the accessibility of sustainable food for others.

It should be noted, however, that this finding likely reflected the composition of our sample: the respondents were predominantly highly educated and relatively affluent, which is a common critique in literature about food cooperatives . A board member of Coop Centraal summarized this as follows:

The current members, or the ones we attract, feel that it [the price] isn't all that important. It is important, but it's not the decisive factor for them. (CcMaWNcP)

Therefore, even though a lower price could be a striking example of an external individualistic benefit, we argue that for most of our respondents this factor might also be interpreted as a collectivistic incentive in the MIT framework. More specifically, as members expressed finding the accessibility of healthy and sustainable food important, this factor might be considered a shared goal motivating members to participate (Birchall & Simmons, 2004; Povitz, 2019).

4.1.2 Collectivistic incentives: Shared values and goals

Next to individualistic incentives, all interviewees reported being motivated to participate in the cooperative because it aligns with their personal beliefs in some way. Many of them described this alignment with their personal beliefs as one of the most important motivating factors to participate. These beliefs varied across respondents but consistently reflected dissatisfaction with conventional food retail and a need for a more sustainable and ethical food system. In the terms of MIT, these mutual needs translate into shared goals that motivate members to participate (Birchall & Simmons, 2004).

As was discussed in section 4.1.1, most members did value affordability of the products, but not in first instance. Rather, their concerns ran deeper. Some focused on environmental concerns, like excessive packaging or long supply chains. Others were more worried about social inequality in leading discount supermarket chains, like unfair pricing towards suppliers, or about the dominance of unhealthy processed food. Interestingly, respondents viewed their cooperative membership as a tangible, positive response to these concerns. For one member, this was one of the main reasons to become a member:

"It's important that I can buy that food for my children, that I can raise them in a healthy way. [...] When I go to a supermarket, [I find it] [...] frustrating how everything is wrapped in a thousand layers of packaging. That was another reason for me to get involved in something like this." (CcMeWCP)

For some respondents, the ethical concerns about conventional food retailers were part of a broader ideological conviction that extends well beyond the cooperative itself. A few interviewees indicated that they are simultaneously active in other cooperatives, suggesting that their membership in the food cooperative is not an isolated choice but an expression of a more general belief in the cooperative model as an alternative to capitalist business structures. This aligns with Sanz-Cañada et al. (2024), who finds that more than half the members of a Spanish food cooperative were active in other alternative food organizations.

Related to this, some respondents reported a strong sense of duty to do something valuable and contribute to the realization of these shared goals. This could be linked with shared values of MIT (Birchall & Simmons, 2004). In that sense, cooperative members did not view their participation as merely something they need to do in order to get certain benefits, but as something they consider a responsibility:

"I also think it's just important, as a citizen in this day and age, to get involved and work towards certain goals. So that's part of it, too." (CcMaWNcP)

This feeling of responsibility could be interpreted as mostly self-imposed rather than externally pressured and was therefore experienced as a positive motivator rather than a burden. This aligns with the expectation sub-dimension of 'Obligation to Volunteer as a Duty' (OVD), described by Galant et al. (2017), which they find to be more related with 'Obligation to Volunteer as a Commitment' (OVC), and thus bears rather positive connotations.

From an SDT perspective, both shared goals and shared values correspond to more internalized forms of extrinsic motivation, rather than to purely external regulation (Ryan & Deci, 2020). According to SDT, internalized motivations are more stable and self-sustaining. This could explain their prominence in our interviews, as members with less self-sustaining motivations are more likely to leave the cooperative.

4.1.3 Collectivistic incentives: Sense of community and ownership

Respondents not only reported shared goals and values as their main motivational driver but also felt an explicit attachment to the cooperative as an organization. A first expression of this was a sense of community with fellow members. Several respondents spoke of recognizing each other in the store, knowing each other's names, and feeling part of a

group that shared not only a physical space but a common project. This resonates with Birchall & Simmons' (2004) finding that most participating members have a strong sense of community. For some of our respondents, this community dimension was among the most meaningful aspects of their membership:

"Building a community, getting to know one another, and having that sense that we're all members of this cooperative pulling in the same direction. That's something I actually find very important." (CcMaWNcP)

Beyond this sense of community, respondents also expressed a notably strong sense of ownership. When asked about what the cooperative means to them, many referred to the store as 'ours' and described themselves as co-owners:

"That's important in the story, too, you know. It's a social matter [...]. It's our store." (CcMeWCP)

This sense of ownership was reflected both in what members said and reported how they acted while doing their shopping. Respondents noted that cooperative members behave differently in the cooperative than regular retail customers. Cooperative members were said to be more careful with products, and feel comfortable helping at the store, even when not doing a shift themselves:

"For example, when I'm doing my grocery shopping. And I see that there are four people at the checkout. And there's only one cashier, [...] I say, 'I'll quickly open a second checkout.' Then I can help three people. And then it's my turn" (BmMeRNcP1)

Although this sense of ownership was not a factor in our theoretical framework, it aligns closely with the literature. The sense of ownership resonates with the affective attachment sub-dimension of OVC, as it reflects a sense of belonging to the cooperative (Gallant et al., 2017). Furthermore, the members' sense of ownership can be linked to SDT's integration: the deepest form of internalization, in which motivation stems from alignment with one's own identity (Ryan & Deci, 2020). When the cooperative becomes part of who members are, rather than merely something they support, it seems natural that they come to experience it as their own store and, with that, develop a sense of ownership.

Notably, this sense of community and ownership seemed to develop through participation rather than preceding it, suggesting two distinct motivational layers: first, a pre-existing layer of personal values and individual benefits that leads people to join the food cooperative, followed by a second layer of shared identity and community that forms only after membership unfolds. The specific role of the mandatory shifts in fostering this attachment is examined more closely in section 4.2, where we analyze how members experienced the shifts.

4.2 Experience of mandatory shifts

Three dimensions emerged across interviews when respondents spoke about their experience of the mandatory shifts. First, the resources that shaped whether members were able to participate: time, skills, and social networks. Second, the shift experience itself: what members found motivating, enjoyable, or difficult about the work they do. Third, how the obligation to do shifts affected their broader motivation to remain engaged in the cooperative.

4.2.1 Resources

Even though the mandatory character of the task-related participation presupposes the resources of Birchall and Simmons' Participation Chain (2004), these resources still influenced members' experience of the shifts.

Time was the most often mentioned resource during our interviews. While retired members showed more eagerness to take on additional shifts or other forms of engagement, almost all respondents – even the professionally active ones – reported that it was manageable to fit one shift into their monthly agenda. However, several respondents acknowledged that time could function as a barrier for potential new members to join the cooperative. (This aspect will be explored further in section 4.3.2.)

Having fellow members in one's social network influenced both recruitment and engagement. Members who already knew other cooperants were more easily persuaded to join the cooperative and commit to the monthly shift, and some indicated they liked planning shifts with acquaintances. In Coop Centraal, the youngest cooperative, many of the more engaged volunteers reported close relationships with the founders, indicating that social ties might be especially important for the early stages of the cooperative. Overall, these findings align with those of Ranville (2025), who demonstrates that social capital facilitates participation, as it can compensate for lower skills or experience.

Regarding skills and experience, none found the tasks too difficult. However, some noted that certain skills, like self-confidence, the ability to learn easily or having attention to detail, might not come naturally to everyone.

4.2.2 The shift experience

Most respondents described their experience of the shifts as generally positive, though the sources of their enjoyment varied considerably.

The social dimension was most frequently cited as the primary source of enjoyment. Shifts were described as "a chance to get to know other people" (CcMeRNcP1), and several

respondents noted that this extends to interactions with customers, who are themselves fellow cooperative members.

Beyond the social aspect, many also found enjoyment in the tasks themselves: some noted the resemblance with the children's pretend game of playing shop, others appreciated the hands-on contrast to their regular white-collar professional environment. One respondent (BcMeWCA2) described the shift as "energizing", seeing it as a way to contribute to a "positive project".

However, not all respondents shared this enthusiasm. One member (BmMeRCA) found the work uninteresting, though acknowledged that a pleasant atmosphere could make a difference. Others partly supported this statement, describing occasional boredom during quiet periods. Yet, no-one disengaged in that case: most members sought out additional tasks or used downtime to talk with fellow shifters, which they considered valuable in its own right. This again stresses the importance of the social aspect of the shifts.

Not all social interactions were experienced as uniformly positive, however. Tensions occasionally arose because of perceived unequal efforts, or notably the informal but strongly felt authority of highly committed members:

"You see those people just sitting there messing around on their phones. And they don't pay attention to the work that still needs to be done in the shop." (BmMeRNcP2)

"Some people I'm scared of [...] because they are very [...] efficient and you cannot be late. [...] Some people are extremely strict." (CcMeWNcA)

One daily manager (CcMaWNcP) acknowledged this dynamic explicitly, noting that members who invest significantly more time in the cooperative may develop a stronger sense of ownership, sometimes causing frictions.

These frictions are nonetheless telling: they point to the shifts as a space where members' feelings of ownership and community become visible and, at times, contested. These findings go further than what Birchall and Simmons (2004) describe, suggesting that there is not merely a correlation but a causal relationship between active participation and community feelings, with the shifts themselves reinforcing the second motivational layer described in section 4.1.3. In the next section, we will explore further how this mechanism works.

4.2.3 How can motivation be reinforced by mandatory shifts?

The way in which the shifts strengthened members' commitment to the cooperative seemed to differ between less actively involved and more engaged members in our sample. For more actively involved members who go to the Annual General Meeting (AGM) or take

part in working groups, the mandatory shifts indeed deepened their involvement with the cooperative. By being physically present in the store and working together with other members, a sense of ownership and community emerged that more abstract forms of membership cannot generate in the same intensity:

“I’m part of a number of cooperatives. The electricity here comes from Ecopower [...] but I’m not actually making anything with my own hands for Ecopower. I have a very different feeling about that compared to Coop Centraal.” (CcMeRNcP4)

However, not all interviewed members were striving for this deeper level of involvement. Some consciously focused on the store’s day-to-day operations, without taking up other forms of formal participation in decision-making processes. One such member (CcMeWNcP) summarized this by describing themselves as a “typical workman”. For these less (or differently) involved members, the shifts also generated a sense of community and ownership – but this functioned more as a reminder of what they were part of, rather than motivating them to engage more broadly. Together with the mandatory nature of the shift, this reminder prevented their involvement in the cooperative from fading.

“I think the feeling that this is actually a requirement makes the motivation stronger to go. Otherwise, you end up doing all sorts of other things that seem more urgent or important, and then I might lose sight of Coop Centraal.” (CcMeSNcA)

Based on these insights from the interviews, we argue that the mandatory shifts seem to have two functions. First, a deepening function, strengthening the commitment of already engaged members. Second, an anchoring function, ensuring that less engaged members stay committed to the cooperative.

4.3 Members’ experience of practical and ethical tensions

This section broadens the perspective beyond the individual member experience, exploring how meso and macro level aspects shaped members’ experiences of the mandatory shift system and the cooperative in general. We first discuss the practical aspects that influence members’ experience. Then we turn to the ethical paradoxes that emerged from the interviews: the meso level paradox around the exclusionary character of the shifts, and the macro level paradox around whether the cooperative model truly delivers on its social values and transformative ambitions.

4.3.1 The importance of practical support during the shifts

In line with the observations of Sanz-Cañada et al. (2024), one member (BcMeWCA2) noted that the high staff turnover, resulting from different members completing their shift, reduced efficiency. However, this did not bother them. Additionally, a couple of members expressed concerns about the difficulty of maintaining consistent quality of work, as not all members were as careful in presenting and selecting fruits and vegetables, resulting in unappealing or spoiled produce. One member (BmMeRCA) reported that these quality issues already caused a fellow member to quit the cooperative. Notably, Coop Centraal avoided this problem by assigning a dedicated team of members, responsible for daily produce presentation on a rotating basis.

Beyond the cooperative's operation, the organization of the shifts also influenced members' personal experience. Members appreciated clear instructions and support during shifts, especially when facing difficulties, and valued the possibility to rely on fellow members and management. Many emphasized the importance of having a variety of shift types (e.g., cleaning, stocking, administrative work), as it allows flexibility for those who prefer not to serve customers or cannot work during opening hours. Some members also voiced their wish to be treated as genuine volunteers and consequently to get enough freedom during their shifts. SDT can be used to explain why these factors are so important: as competence and autonomy are both basic psychological needs, members stay motivated if they feel supported and able to make their own choices (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

4.3.2 Ethical paradox of exclusion

4.3.2.1 Mandatory shifts as a barrier to entry

At the meso level, the interviews explored how members experienced the ethical paradox surrounding the exclusionary character of the shifts. Many members indeed recognized potential barriers created by the mandatory shift system. While most respondents reported having no major issues with their own monthly shift, they identified the time commitment as a barrier to entry for others, stating that "not everyone has as much free time" (CcMeRNcP4). This confirms the concern of Zitcer (2015) that the mandatory shifts exclude individuals based on a lack of free time. In addition to time, the respondents mentioned the sense of obligation and unfamiliarity with the model as possible obstacles. Interestingly, some respondents did not mind these barriers, arguing that those who find the barriers too high simply should not join:

"I think there are people who simply don't want to do [the shifts]. They just won't go to that store. That's the choice you make." (BmMeRNcP1)

4.3.2.2 Arguments for and against making shifts mandatory

Whether or not members felt conflicted about the barriers the shifts create, almost all members indicated to be in favor of some mandatory form of engagement. This might be explained by the fundamental ideological role many respondents ascribed to the shifts. Without this mandatory engagement, the cooperative would lose its participatory character:

“[Without shifts] you just have an ordinary shop, that simply doesn’t work. Then it’s no longer a cooperative.” (BmMeRNcP1)

In addition, many respondents rejected the idea of an alternative system where completing shifts would be optional, possibly linked to financial compensation.

“Because that [alternative system] kind of pulls the existing inequalities in society straight into the Coop. And then the rich can still have the poor work for them for money.” (CcMaWNcP)

In contrast, a few members (including CcMeRNcA and CcMeXCP) still considered a system with optional shifts as a viable alternative, when mandatory shifts prove practically unfeasible. This pragmatic stance was also shared by the only two members (CcMeRNcP2 and CcMeRNcP1) who explicitly supported allowing people to join the cooperative and shop there without requiring them to work a shift. They believed the cooperative should grow further, especially in terms of revenue, and making the shifts mandatory hindered this growth:

“We need to find a way for people who only want to spend time buying products to be able to do that. [...] Because if we only keep doing what we’re doing now, we’ll end up stagnating.” (CcMeRNcP1)

Interestingly, practical arguments were also used by other respondents to defend the opposite view, as they considered mandatory shifts as the economic foundation of the model. Notably, one member of BEEScoop (BcMeWCA1), the largest cooperative in our sample, argued that shifts were essential to prevent the cooperative from growing too large and losing its distinct feel. Additionally, while literature often criticizes mandatory shifts on ideological grounds for excluding people (Zitcer, 2015), the strongest ideological arguments of respondents were used to defend the shifts:

“You really need that collaboration. [...] Otherwise it becomes something purely economic, while it’s actually about building a community and working towards a shared project.” (BcMeWCA1)

To conclude, it seems that ultimately, the debate on mandatory shifts does not follow the usual tensions between ideological and pragmatic concerns as described by Ashforth and Reingen (2014). Instead, arguments both for and against the system can be made from either viewpoint.

4.3.2.3 Differences in opinions about enforcement of shifts

Opinions on the enforcement of the mandatory shifts were more polarized. Inspired by larger cooperatives like BEEScoop, some members of Coop Centraal (CcMeRNcP4 and CcMaWNcP) supported implementing punishment measures when members do not complete their shifts. This was opposed by another member (CcMeRNcP3), as they saw the cooperative as a voluntary commitment. Interestingly, a member of BEEScoop (BcMeWCA2) found their own system too strict, opposing the “double compensation” rule for missed shifts. Several respondents shared a similar view. They acknowledged the need for some sort of follow-up to avoid opportunistic behavior but attached great importance to remaining flexible to some extent. One member of Coop Centraal, who admitted not meeting the shift requirement themselves, had a more extreme vision:

“I think it’s important that it’s a fair system. And therefore not an equal system. [...] One where everyone can contribute in based on their own profile.” (CcMeWCA)

This aversion to overly strict enforcement and the appreciation for flexibility aligns with insights from literature. When volunteering becomes too strictly enforced, this may undermine motivation, continuance intention, and well-being (Cho et al., 2023; Geiser et al., 2014). While often not explicitly stated, members valued preserving their sense of autonomy and more internal forms of motivation. Additionally, if shifts were to be too strictly enforced, some members would perceive this as burdensome or constraining. We argue that, consequently, their feelings of obligation would change from ‘commitment’ to ‘duty’, and thus become rather negative, in line with the findings of Gallant et al. (2017).

4.3.3 Ethical paradox of conflicting social values

Although not central to our research question, and therefore not explicitly included in our interview guide, signs of active citizenship and societal awareness emerged as a notable theme during both data collection and analysis. Given their relevance to the wider debate on the transformative impact of participatory food cooperatives, we include these perspectives here, while acknowledging that they represent the views of only a subset of respondents and should therefore be interpreted with caution.

Two interviewees (FcEx and CcMeRNcA) identified a conflict between the model of mandatory shifts and social values of the cooperative movement as, especially on a large scale, the mandatory shifts diminish the number of jobs. This reasoning was used by the expert from Febecoop to justify why they did not advocate legalizing volunteer work in cooperatives explicitly:

“From within the cooperative movement, which is a social movement, can you take the lead and say: volunteer work in retail is something we support and want to encourage?”(FcEx)

This critique resonated with the main argument of Guthman (2008): by creating community-led solutions based on voluntary contributions, also our context of participatory food cooperatives might reinforce a neoliberal paradigm, rather than challenging it.

Regarding the value of social inclusion, some members argued that mandatory shifts align the goals of social inclusion and sustainability. Through the substitution of paid labor with member contributions, the shifts enable the cooperative to offer affordable, sustainable food. A couple of members brought forward that achieving this alignment was difficult in practice. They felt like the cooperative failed to reach the individuals struggling to afford better food otherwise. This observation indicated that participatory food cooperatives still struggle to overcome the challenge of inaccessibility of sustainable food, as described by Hermesse et al. (2023) in the context of Brussels. Certain members thought that loosening the standards for products could help to overcome this tension:

“The more your assortment is focused on higher-quality products, the harder it becomes for someone with a very small income.” (CcMeRNcP4)

This proposition resonates with the argument of Zitcer (2015). This study cautions that food serves as a signifier, and the presence of expensive or esoteric products may lead individuals to perceive the cooperative as an elitist organization, inaccessible to those from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Taken together, both perspectives hinted at a fundamental flaw in our food system: even with free member labor, and its related challenges, truly sustainable food still seemed to be inaccessible for the more socially vulnerable. This is connected to a significant question within AFNs: can sustainable food ever achieve affordability? The lower price point may, in fact, always stem from the externalization of costs, whether to human well-being or the environment, at some level (Turkkan, 2023).

4.4 Conclusion

Taking together the insights from our analysis regarding members' motivation, we can conclude that beyond confirming the relative importance of collectivistic incentives, the data suggests a distinction between two sequential motivational layers. A first layer comprises the motivations that lead individuals to join the cooperative: shared goals and values and, to a lesser extent, individualistic incentives. A second layer emerges after joining the cooperative, as members develop an attachment to the cooperative itself through feelings of ownership and community. Where the first layer is largely pre-existing and ideologically

grounded, the second is relational and experiential, built through repeated contact with the cooperative and its members. This second layer contains a motivation that was not yet identified in our theoretical framework: a feeling of ownership.

The mandatory shifts play a central role in reinforcing this second layer, although not for everyone in the same way. For more engaged members, the shift served a deepening function: being able to contribute and work together through hands-on experience intensified their motivation to take on additional responsibilities. For less engaged members, this same experience functioned less as a stepping stone for further involvement, but rather as a reminder of belonging. For them, the mandatory aspect of the shifts was significant: it ensured members remain invested and keep their connection to the cooperative alive. We call this second function the anchoring function. Whether the shifts serve a deepening or anchoring function for members appears to be dependent on resources, particularly time. The members who reported being more involved because of the shifts often had considerably more time than members for whom the shifts served an anchoring function.

Considering the practical aspects, the analysis led us to conclude that a smooth organization of the shifts, including the possibility to choose specific tasks, does indeed affect how members experience the shifts. A smooth organization could positively impact motivations, when this fulfills members' basic psychological needs. In the food cooperatives under study, this seemed to be the case, as, somewhat surprisingly, practical tensions were hardly felt.

The results regarding how the ethical paradoxes influenced members' experiences were more ambiguous, making it difficult to draw a robust conclusion. A few members perceived tensions in the model, as they noted, for example, that the products remained inaccessible to lower-income individuals. These tensions might have a less outspoken impact on members' experience as both ideological and pragmatic arguments could be used to either defend or oppose the system of mandatory shifts. Pragmatically, they reduce labor costs but hinder growth; ideologically, they foster equality within the cooperative and make sustainable food more affordable, but act as an exclusionary mechanism, as investing a few unpaid hours every month in the cooperative might not be feasible for more vulnerable individuals.

This conclusion led us to expanding our theoretical model (developed in section 2.4) by integrating the insights from existing literature with the multi-level analyses of our empirical study. Specifically, we developed two distinguished theoretical models, one based on the experiences of less engaged members, the other of more engaged members.

Figure 4.1 expands our theoretical framework, showing how less engaged members experience mandatory shifts in participatory food cooperatives.

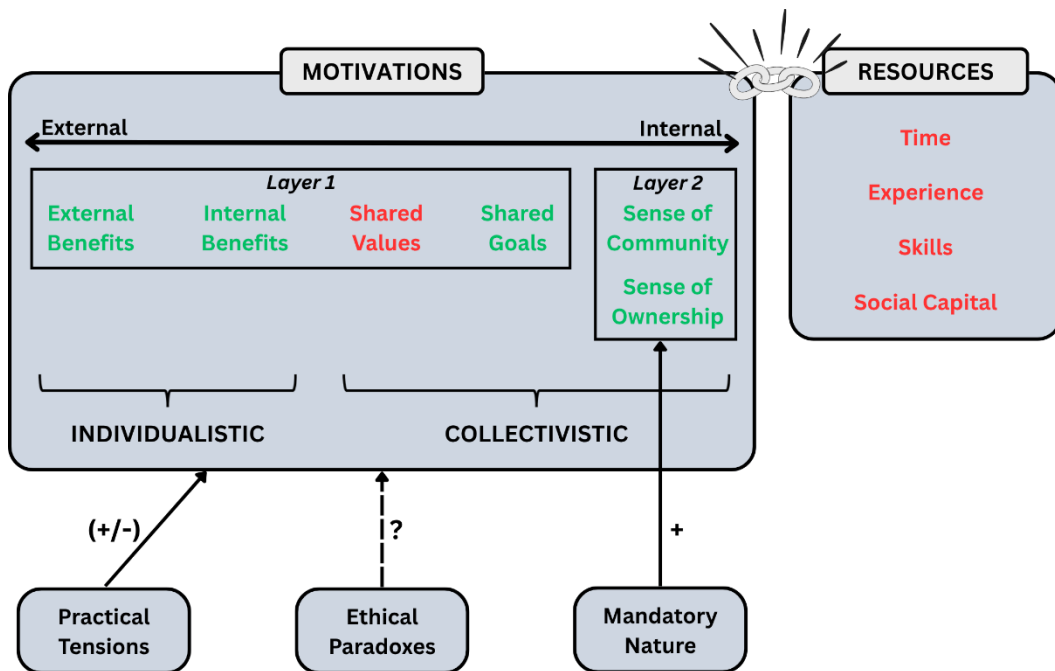


Figure 4.1: Experience of the mandatory shifts by less engaged members. (Expansion of Figure 2.1.)

The motivations encompass two layers. Layer 1 represents motivations that are present before joining the cooperative. Layer 2 consists of motivations that form after joining the cooperative, through the shifts. For less engaged members, the link of the participation chain is under pressure due to their limited resources. The floating frames represent tensions surrounding the mandatory shifts, as identified in the literature. Solid arrows represent relationships that emerged from the data, with '+' indicating a positive relationship and '-' a negative one. Practical tensions can have a minor negative effect on motivation; however, in the cooperatives studied, these tensions were generally well managed and, in some cases, even led to increased motivation. The mandatory nature of the shifts appeared to anchor less engaged members to the cooperative, strengthening their second motivational layer. The influence of ethical paradoxes remained ambiguous, and this arrow therefore remains dashed.

Figure 4.2 expands our theoretical framework, showing how more engaged members experience mandatory shifts in participatory food cooperatives.

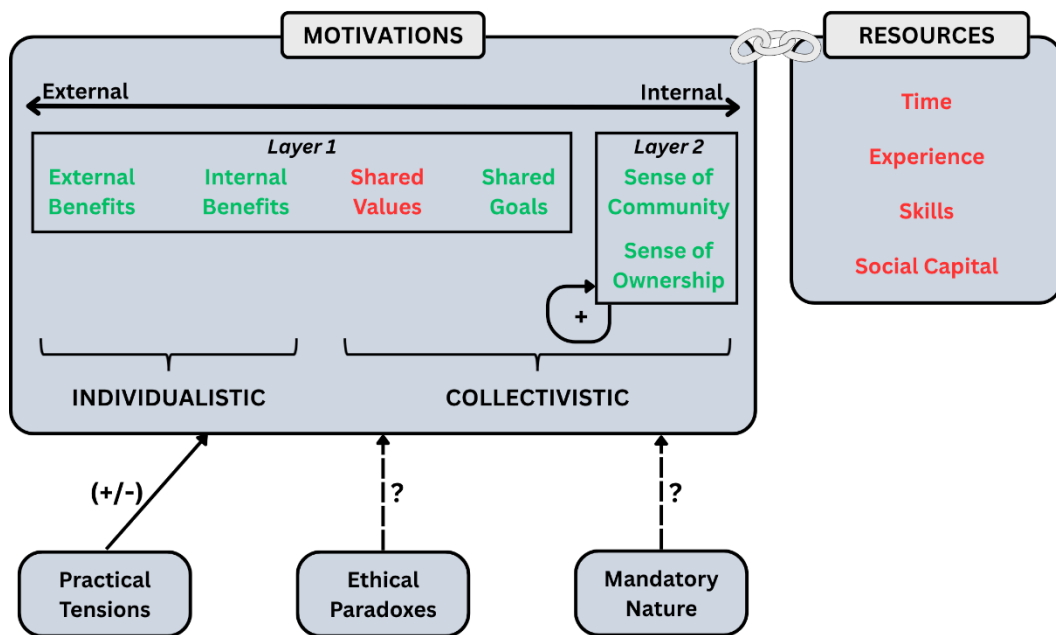


Figure 4.2: Experience of the mandatory shifts by more engaged members. (Expansion of Figure 2.1.)

The structure of this figure mirrors that of Figure 4.1, with the same motivational layers, floating frames, and arrow conventions. For more engaged members, however, the participation chain link is not under pressure, reflecting their greater availability of resources. Additionally, layer 2 appears to be self-reinforcing: these motivations drive members to complete their shifts, which in turn further strengthens those same motivations. The influence of the mandatory nature on motivation was less clear for this group, as these members reported feeling very motivated regardless of the requirement. This arrow therefore remains dashed. The influence of ethical paradoxes remained ambiguous, and this arrow therefore also remains dashed.

5 Discussion

5.1 Scientific contribution

This study makes several contributions to the existing literature on member participation in cooperatives and voluntary work in general, combining existing theories and applying them to the specific setting of food cooperatives. First, our study provides an empirical account of what motivates members of food cooperatives in Flanders and Brussels to participate, a context that has received little systematic attention in the existing literature. The findings largely confirm previous research, including the study of Birchall and Simmons (2004), stating that collectivistic incentives outweigh individualistic incentives. Our analysis adds nuance by showing that members' motivations in participatory food cooperatives are deeply entangled with the practice of completing the shifts, leading to either reinforcement or durability of their overall motivation and engagement.

Second, the study explores how members experience the mandatory shifts in food cooperatives. This is an underexplored angle in cooperative literature, which has tended to focus on voluntary participation. Our contribution here is the somewhat surprising finding that instead of undermining motivation, as is common in mandatory volunteering (Cho et al., 2023; Geiser et al., 2014), the mandatory character of the shifts appeared to anchor and deepen members' commitment to the cooperative. This finding enriches the more general debate on obligations in voluntary work.

Third, the study contributes to understanding the ethical paradoxes in the model of participatory food cooperatives through the experience of individual members. In this context, the paradox of exclusion turned out to be the most salient. Additionally, our study points to the antisocial consequences of volunteer work in retail operations and tensions between the sustainability and affordability of the products. By articulating these tensions, the study contributes to the general literature on AFNs.

5.2 Limitations

Several limitations of this study deserve consideration. A first concern relates to self-selection: respondents who agreed to be interviewed are likely among the more engaged members of their cooperative, which may have skewed the findings towards more positive perceptions. Snowball sampling was used in an attempt to counter this potential bias. We explicitly asked respondents if they could think of other members who might have had a

more negative experience. This allowed us to reach members through different social networks within the cooperative rather than relying solely on open calls.

Despite interviewing some members that were less actively involved with the cooperative through snowball sampling, the findings do show a relative homogeneity of views. This could however also be a finding, rather than a methodological limitation: if food cooperatives structurally attract socially engaged individuals, a degree of convergence in the data is to be expected.

Another limitation of the study is the relatively small number of respondents. While this allowed for an in-depth exploration of individual experiences, it limits the extent to which the findings can be translated to other cases in other regions or countries, especially given the specific legal situation in Belgium.

As with all research, researcher bias cannot be fully excluded. During the data collection phase, we were aware that the questions should remain as neutral as possible to avoid leading respondents in a certain direction. In addition, the risk that the researchers' personal assumptions shaped the reading and interpretation of the data was mitigated by applying a two-researcher coding principle, in which the interviews were read and interpreted independently before being discussed jointly.

Additionally, we attempted to counter social desirability bias of the respondents by guaranteeing that their data would be fully anonymized and their personal information would not be shared with the cooperative.

Finally, the study was conducted exclusively with Dutch- and English-speaking members in the Brussels and Antwerp region. Francophone members were excluded due to language barriers. This may have introduced additional bias, particularly for the Brussels cooperatives. In these two cooperatives, the majority of members are francophone, leading to fewer members being able to participate in the study.

5.3 Recommendations for future research

This research uncovers different avenues for future research. Regarding the model of mandatory shifts, qualitative follow-up studies could focus more on investigating the experience of people who joined but quit or never joined because of resource-dependent barriers like the mandatory shifts. By mapping out these barriers, this type of research could explore how exclusion could be countered and shed more light on the elitist problem participatory food cooperatives seem to face. In addition, quantitative follow-up studies could check whether a larger sample of members in other cooperatives and in different countries experience the shifts in the same way as the interviewed members.

A couple of interesting topics emerged in our study that were not directly linked to our research question but deserve to be studied more in depth. First, even though members confirmed that the prices at the cooperatives are lower when compared to other organic supermarkets, most were not concerned about the prices. This raises the question of how much perception of prices and actual prices are congruent, and how price perceptions might also play a role in the decision not to join the cooperative, especially for people with less financial means.

Second, several respondents perceived the member base as very homogeneous. To address these topics, further research could investigate whether the member base is indeed as homogeneous as perceived and, if this is indeed the case, why cooperatives fail to reach a more diverse member base despite their open membership. Research could also take a more solution-focused approach, by investigating ways to increase the social impact of the model. For example, successful social inclusion projects that are already in place at some cooperatives could be more thoroughly studied.

Third, the role of food cooperatives within the broader food system could be further explored. Research focused on the macro level impact of the model could investigate how these types of community-led initiatives can contribute to making sustainable food more accessible and to which extent converging affordability and sustainability is achievable.

Another avenue for further research could be to examine which contextual factors are needed for this cooperative model to succeed. In addition to legal challenges in some jurisdictions, a couple of members felt like there was a lot of competition from other organic supermarkets in the same area. A comparative study between multiple countries focusing on the power of traditional supermarkets and on the different legal structures could shed some light on this issue.

5.4 Recommendations for practitioners and societal relevance

Based on our study, we are able to draw recommendations for different actors: participatory food cooperatives and their members, other types of consumer cooperatives, and policymakers.

5.4.1 Recommendations for participatory food cooperatives

Our findings suggest that, even among members who have already joined the cooperative, and thus experienced the entry barriers as surpassable, resources continue to shape their engagement. Members with more available time tend to develop a deeper involvement, experiencing the deepening function of the mandatory shifts, while members with fewer

resources remain connected primarily through the anchoring function. Participatory food cooperatives should be mindful of this dynamic, offering meaningful participation options for all members.

Beyond acknowledging differences in resources, participatory food cooperatives should invest in the practical organization of the shifts. Members stay engaged when they feel supported and free to contribute in ways that match their interests and availability. A smooth organization also helps address the challenge of high turnover, as experienced members can be deployed in tasks requiring specific skills, such as quality control, ensuring consistent operational quality despite the rotating workforce.

Regarding the enforcement of mandatory shifts, our findings suggest that members have varying opinions. Both on the ideological and pragmatic level, arguments for and against strict enforcement were made. To deal with these different opinions, we would advise participatory food cooperatives to take a proactive stance, by regularly asking members for input about enforcement mechanisms. The cooperatives are encouraged to think about ways to make giving this input as easy as possible, for example, by using different channels through which members can report smaller practical issues. The members themselves could also take an active role in this process by engaging in the governance structures that are already in place within the cooperative.

5.4.2 Recommendations for other types of consumer cooperatives

Given that in our study, the obligation to work in the cooperatives increased members' involvement by strengthening their sense of community and ownership, other types of consumer cooperatives looking for ways to increase member participation might want to consider whether this model could be applied in their sector as well. Even more technical cooperatives, like cooperatives providing energy, could implement a variant of this model, for example by requiring their members to participate in promotional events for the cooperative. If mandatory work turns out to be unfeasible, cooperatives could still think about ways to give their members a look behind the scenes and to let them discover the day-to-day operations of the cooperative, which seemingly helps to keep them engaged on a regular basis.

5.4.3 Role of participatory food cooperatives in society

Even though participatory food cooperatives may seem like a marginal phenomenon, their societal relevance is far from negligible. Locally, these cooperatives create a sense of community within their neighborhoods, as members get to know each other through their participation. To amplify this effect, we would advise policymakers to establish a clear legal

framework and even provide targeted subsidies that support experimenting with this business model.

Within the broader AFN-movement, the model emphasizes the central aim of providing healthy and organic food at affordable prices. Even though participatory food cooperatives still face challenges to realize this aim, the model encourages further experimentation and serves as a strong reminder that the ultimate objective should be to make our food system socially just and environmentally sustainable.

Individual reflections

Kobe Theylaert

Reflection on the research process

Our research process was not a linear process, but I think that's inherent to a thesis. For us, a big initial challenge was defining the scope, as we started from two separate thesis topics. After trying to combine both topics, our first problem statement was too ambitious: we wanted to explore individual (micro), organizational (meso), and societal (macro) dimensions of mandatory shifts all at once. After some much-needed feedback from our supervisor, we narrowed this down to the micro level, focusing mainly on motivational theories.

During the interviews, however, it became clear that this was too narrow. Two things stood out. First, the motivations of cooperative members turned out to be quite similar across respondents, which made it harder to add something new to the existing literature. Second, many respondents naturally brought up organizational or societal perspectives when talking about their personal motivations. For some, those dimensions were apparently impossible to separate. After the interviews, we decided to broaden our scope again and include literature on the meso and macro levels after all.

In hindsight, this is the main thing I would do differently. If we had started with a slightly broader scope, we could have designed the interview guide to actively ask all respondents about those dimensions. Now we had to rely mostly on the moments where it came up spontaneously. That said, this also shows one of the strengths of semi-structured interviews and an abductive coding approach: staying open to what respondents bring up themselves often leads to insights you would not have found otherwise.

Overall, I am happy with what we produced. We were able to confirm a lot of existing literature, while also adding new insights about the specific role of mandatory shifts in member motivation. And we made a first attempt at connecting the micro, meso, and macro perspectives surrounding mandatory shifts, although I would say especially the macro aspects need further research.

Collaboration and individual contribution

Being my second master studies, I did not want to be inefficient with my time this year. I decided to squeeze the preparatory program and the Master program in one year, also combining it with an extracurricular internship in Mexico and a job search. For this thesis, I was paired with Emma, who also had a demanding schedule with an internship and then a

full-time job. Especially due to our time difference and our working hours, one could say that, on paper, it did not look like an easy collaboration.

But in practice, it worked very well. We were both serious about our work and tried to divide tasks fairly. When there was tension, it was usually because one of us felt the other was doing too much, not too little. Our approach was generally to call together to agree on a structure, divide sections between us, work on them separately, and then review each other's drafts. By the end, we had rewritten so much together that I can confidently say we both are full owner over the entire thesis.

This was the first time I worked on something this big with someone equally motivated and opinionated. In previous group projects, I was often the one pushing things forward and making final calls. This time, Emma had a well-reasoned view on everything, and it did not always match mine. That made decisions slower. But it also made the thesis considerably better than if I would have written this alone, because in hindsight, I now realize Emma's views were often times more correct than mine (so thank you for this, Emma!). I thus learned that collaborating with someone who genuinely engages with the work is maybe not always the most efficient, but it surely is very constructive.

Learning process and future perspective

My previous study was in bioscience engineering. In this research field, results tend to be straightforward: the same experiment produces the same outcome regardless of where or when you run it. I learned that social sciences work differently. Motivations are context-dependent. Studies contradict each other. Some authors even seem to let their own views influence how they present findings. I had to learn to read more critically and recognize that nuance is even more important in this field.

I also was completely new to qualitative research. One the hand, I really got to appreciate this field. The interviews were not only fun, but the conversations themselves often gave new ideas for structuring our findings, as they always went in unexpected directions. On the other hand, I also learned that this is a really tough research field that may not be the best fit for my profile. I tend to have a hard time equally valuing arguments I personally disagree with, and my analytical mindset constantly looks for patterns, which sometimes makes it tempting to dismiss views that do not fit as 'outliers'. Of course, I understand this is not the 'way to go' in qualitative research, and therefore I did not act on these instincts. But it did make me realize I am not made for this research field.

Beyond the methodology, I also got to know a world I had barely encountered before: the cooperative movement. While I did know some food cooperatives before, I feel like I only started to fully understand how they operate during this thesis. If there is one thing that I

want to continue to learn more on after submitting this thesis, it is this cooperative movement. Maybe I even want to become a member of some cooperatives myself?

Looking ahead, I am certain that qualitative research is not the direction I want to pursue professionally. But even then, a lot of things I learned during this project will be valuable in the future. Especially learning to work together intensively with someone as motivated as me was really pleasant. But it was also useful to be trained more in thinking critically about sources and data, and synthesizing my own findings, as skills like these will also be valuable beyond the academic world.

Emma Vannerom

This individual reflection will not extend the analysis or add any content-related reflections. As Kobe and I were both very cooperative (pun intended), we shared all our ideas on the analysis of our data and the conclusions that could be drawn from our data. These ideas are thus incorporated in the thesis. In this part I will only reflect on the thesis process and how writing this thesis contributed to my personal and professional development.

To select a topic for my thesis, I knew I wanted to find an area of research with societal impact. This led me to consult the “Wetenschapswinkel”, the database of research questions by different associations. This is where I encountered the question of “De Coöperant vzw” about methods to make democratic decisions with more than 100 people involved. This sparked my curiosity, as it resonated with my background in ethics and political philosophy, and my interest in alternative business models. I was thankful that Dr. Friedel, who specializes in cooperative research, was willing to become my supervisor.

She suggested working together with Kobe, who was assigned a topic about volunteer work in cooperatives. Combining the ideas of both of our topics, we started with the aim of investigating how the mandatory shifts influence members’ engagement in democratic decision-making in growing cooperatives.

In the beginning I was a bit hesitant to work so closely together with another student. I could not imagine how this could truly be an added value, except for the operational tasks like conducting interviews and transcribing them. I believe this might be due to my previous studies. In the four years I studied at the Institute of Philosophy, I only had two group assignments, both of which were a small presentation. This left me with the assumption that, while exchanging ideas with others might be insightful, in the end only your individual result mattered and should consist of your personal argumentation. Although our contact via mail and the first video calls reassured me that Kobe was also motivated and proactive,

I still could not see how we would accomplish writing a thesis together. I was afraid a duo thesis would result in a patchwork of parts written by either of us, rather than a paper where would both feel fully responsible for.

During the phase of the literature review, Kobe and I focused indeed on our 'own' topics. While I started reading about participation in decision-making and the effect of growth on member participation, Kobe dived into the literature of volunteering and how mandatory tasks influence motivations. At this stage, even though we exchanged ideas and wrote comments on each other's work, we were both working on our own parts of the thesis. In my experience, this only changed during the second phase of the analysis.

In the second phase, we were no longer working on our own parts of the thesis but really focused on making one cohesive analysis. This process showed me that working together was about more than just dividing the work but also about thinking together and enriching each other's ideas. We also started to re-write each other's passages and even consciously chose to alternate who was working on a specific topic. This led to a finished result where even Kobe and I cannot really distinguish anymore which ideas came from whom. Looking back at this process, I am confident that combining our ideas and having the chance to discuss them thoroughly with each other has led to achieving a better understanding of our topic.

As I was so used to working on writing assignments alone, there were moments when it frustrated me that I felt like the parts of the thesis I had originally written were not 'mine' anymore. Kobe and I had a constructive meeting about this frustration, which helped me to overcome it. In the end, working together has thus not only improved the result, but also helped me in my personal development as I could accept that this thesis is also 'my' work, even if I did not write everything on my own.

The fact that I completed an internship from September until December and started working full time in the same team in January made the thesis process even more interesting for me. On the one hand, I gained skills at my job that I could use in the thesis. As there are a lot of short deadlines in the corporate world, I had to learn to be more efficient and to get things done instead of postponing and striving for perfection. Compared to my thesis in philosophy, I noticed how I worked more efficiently and could more easily handle the fact that things were not perfect from the first draft. I even managed to get an interview through my job, as it turned out that one of my colleagues is a member of BEEScoop.

On the other hand, writing the thesis helped me during this first professional experience. First, I gained skills that were directly applicable in my job. I increased my ability to structure my thoughts and to communicate these ideas with someone else. Second, as a junior in a more experienced team, I often only get a supportive role in projects and, even though my

ideas are always considered, I do not have the responsibility to take a final decision. It was a welcome change for me to have a greater feeling of ownership when working on the thesis. The combination of both also revealed to me that I want to have a certain degree of responsibility and ownership in my future career.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Coding table

Table A1: Table that represents the final coding tree of our coding process. Each code is linked to a 2nd order code, and a broader theme. Also, an example of a quote belonging to that code is given.

Quote	Codes	2 nd order	Theme
I think for many people it can be an experience that enriches their life a bit. That can be the case because you get a bit more technical knowledge about how a shop works or how a cash register works. (CcMaWNcP)	Learning new things / helps you further in life	Internal benefits	Individualistic motivation
I can also do my groceries right away. Since I'm there anyway. (CcMeXCP)	Practical	External benefits	Individualistic motivation
Everything you buy there, you know it's more or less balanced in terms of health. (BcMeWCA1)	Easy doing groceries	External benefits	Individualistic motivation
It [the price] is important. At the beginning, it was quite high and I didn't shop that much. I would just shop a little bit to support and if the product was really good. But right now, it feels like it's actually cheaper than my local supermarket. (CcMeWNcA)	Financial	External benefits	Individualistic motivation
We still try to offer something for everyone, within everyone's budget. Not everyone can pay more than three euros for a cauliflower. [...] So we also look for ways to make sure that... yeah, not everyone has the same budget to buy food. But we do want to offer healthy food at an affordable price. (CcMeRNcP2)	Making good food more affordable	Shared goals	Collectivistic motivation

Quote	Codes	2 nd order	Theme
I see that it is a meaningful concept where we are trying to make a change through something as simple as where we spend our money. So I mean, that's the least maybe we can do be conscious of those everyday little choices and to not purchase things that we know could be harmful to people or the planet. (CcMeWNcA)	Ethical consumption	Shared goals	Collectivistic motivation
It seems fun to me, and I'm already in a number of cooperatives because I find the cooperative idea fascinating (CcMeRNcP4)	Believe in cooperative idea	Shared goals	Collectivistic motivation
[It's unusual for me] to cancel things. If I commit to something [...] then I follow through. (CcMeRNcP2)	Sense of duty	Shared values	Collectivistic motivation
So it's like a small little community within... yeah, that's an extra motivation to keep doing it (BcMeWCA1)	Sense of community	Sense of community	Collectivistic motivation
Taking care of each other. Well, taking care of the shop. So a bit of that sense of ownership, that you're a co-owner (CcMeRNcP3)	Feeling of ownership	Feeling of ownership	Collectivistic motivation
I actually enjoy working in a shop (CcMeWNcP)	Enjoyment tasks	Intrinsic motivation	Experience of the shifts
So for me, the shifts are ideal to get out of my bubble and unwind from a busy work life. (CcMeWNcP)	Shifts as relaxing	Intrinsic motivation	Experience of the shifts
You work together, collaborating, that's fun. (CcMeXCP)	Enjoyment social aspect	Intrinsic motivation	Experience of the shifts
You feel useful because you know: I'm keeping the shop open. (CcMaWNcP)	Feeling valuable	Intrinsic motivation	Experience of the shift
Three hours is quite long. Sometimes it's quiet here. I find that a bit annoying. (CcMeXCP)	Boredom	Lack of motivation	Experience of the shifts

Quote	Codes	2 nd order	Theme
You have those members just walking around during their shift. They have no idea what to do. When they're with me, I give them work. [...] They're just wandering around. Sometimes you have to put people to work. (BmMeRNcP1)	Unequal effort	Tensions during the shift	Experience of the shifts
We have a few members who do five or six shifts every month, which is fantastic, but it also creates a bit of a power imbalance. (CcMaWNcP)	Informal authority	Tensions during the shift	Experience of the shifts
Because you really have people who love doing those shifts. They just really enjoy running the shop. Even if it's only for the social contacts or whatever. But those people often have very little interest in thinking about how things should evolve. (CcMeRNcP4)	Only participation through shifts	Anchoring function	Shifts strengthen motivation
I think the shift helps me feel involved in everything that's happening at Bab'I (BmMeRCA)	Mandatory shifts keep people involved	Anchoring function	Shifts strengthen motivation
You really have to do the shifts to have more say, because otherwise you don't actually know what it's about. (CcMeRNcP1)	Mandatory shifts as a motivator for further involvement	Deepening function	Shifts strengthen motivation
I think I wouldn't have been so quick to join if I didn't know the people behind it. (CcMeWNCa)	Knowing people facilitates entrance	Social networks	Resources
[In the context of volunteering for an additional project] So I thought, it's nice to work with that team again for a while. (CcMeWCP)	Knowing people increasing engagement	Social networks	Resources
I still do all sorts of things. But I'm retired. So by definition I have a bit more free time. (CcMeRNcA)	Having enough time	Time	Resources
Personally, I think you can always free up some time. (CcMeWNcP)	Time management	Time	Resources
So I think you need very little skills to be a member. Everything is taught, and it's actually not that difficult. (CcMeSNcA)	Tasks easy	Skills/experience	Resources

Quote	Codes	2 nd order	Theme
So I do think that certain skills are needed, of course. I'm mainly thinking of some social skills. A bit of self-confidence. Stress resistance. (CcMeSNcA)	Required skills	Skills/experience	Resources
You always have support if you run into a problem. (CcMeRNcP4)	Support	Practical organization	Practical aspects
All tasks are clearly laid out, so you don't have to think too much about them. (CcMeWNcP)	Clear instructions	Practical organization	Practical aspects
For people who don't feel up to doing the shift of opening the shop, there are other tasks that can be done. (CcMeRNcP2)	Variety of shift types	Practical organization	Practical aspects
That's the problem working with so many people. [...] Sometimes those chicory heads are just really ugly. And then they put them on top. You then think the whole crate is ugly. They should remove them right away. (BmMeRNcP1)	Quality of work	Efficiency of shifts	Practical aspects
So I think that the requirement of 'you also have to invest labor' does scare off some people. (CcMeRNcA)	Shifts as a barrier to entry	Tensions relating to the obligation	Ethical paradoxes
If people wouldn't take on the shifts [...] then in the end you can't run the shop. (CcMeRNcP2)	In favor of mandatory shifts (serve a functional purpose)	Tensions relating to the obligation	Ethical paradoxes
If you don't do that [the system of mandatory shifts], then you're just in a regular shop. (CcMeRNcP3)	In favor of mandatory shifts (serve an ideological purpose)	Tensions relating to the obligation	Ethical paradoxes
You also always have people who are well-disposed towards it, but who, for example, don't have the time to do their shift. And then unfortunately they don't become members. Whereas if people could become members in some way, even if only to do their shopping, you could always generate more turnover. (CcMeRNcP2)	Against mandatory shifts + plea for alternatives	Tensions relating to the obligation	Ethical paradoxes

Quote	Codes	2 nd order	Theme
If it were really that strict and rigid, then I would already have quit. (CcMeWCA)	Against strict enforcement	Tension relating to the enforcement	Ethical paradoxes
If we keep growing and if more people come who shop very often but don't want to contribute, then it's inevitable, I think, that we take the next step and refuse them. (CcMaWNcP)	In favor of strict enforcement	Tension relating to the enforcement	Ethical paradoxes
If you reason from a socialist perspective, you push people out of the labor market. (CcMeRNcA)	System makes jobs disappear	Tensions relating to social values	Ethical paradoxes
If you only have organic vegetables, so to speak, which – even if they're cheap – are still twice as expensive as what you buy at Aldi. (CcMeRNcP4)	Products sold vs. social goals?	Tensions relating to social values	Ethical paradoxes

Appendix B: Interview guide

Table B1: Interview guide used for interviewing the cooperative members. Questions are written in English and in Dutch (between brackets).

Area of interest	Question	Probe
Explaining informed consent	Do you have any questions after reading the form? To be perfectly clear: we will record this interview, but will delete the recording after transcription. [Heb je vragen over de informed consent form? Ter verduidelijking: we zullen dit interview opnemen, maar verwijderen deze opname direct na de transcriptie.]	/
Gathering personal information	Can you briefly introduce yourself? [Kan je jezelf kort voorstellen?]	(Gender, age, family situation, job, education) [Gender, leeftijd, familiesituatie, job, educatie]
Icebreaker	How did you get involved in the project of COOP Centraal? [Hoe ben je betrokken geraakt bij het project van Coop Centraal?]	What convinced you to join? What made you doubt? [Wat heeft je overtuigd om lid te worden? Wat heeft je eventueel doen twijfelen?] How long have you been a member? [Hoe lang ben je al lid?] How often do you do your groceries there? [Hoe vaak doe je er je inkopen?]
Descriptive question (resources shiften)	How often do you work? [Hoe vaak doe je je shiften?] What kind of shifts do you do? [Welk soort werk doe je?]	Do you always have the same tasks? [Doe je altijd dezelfde taak?] Did you already have experience in such tasks? [Had je al ervaring in gelijkaardige taken?]

Area of interest	Question	Probe
Participation in governance – General understanding	What do you think ‘member participation’ means?	<i>If necessary, we explain the 3 forms of member participation. Then we ask which forms they do and how.</i>
	[Wat versta jij onder ‘ledenbetrokkenheid’?]	<i>[Eventueel uitleggen dat er 3 vormen van participatie zijn. Dan doorvragen welke vormen ze doen.]</i>
Participation in governance – Own experiences	How engaged are you in the decision making of the coop?	Do you go to the general assembly meetings?
	[Hoe betrokken ben je bij de besluitvorming van de coop?]	[Ga je naar de algemene vergaderingen?]
Growing coop	According to you, what effect does the growth of the coop have on member participation?	/
	[Hoe beïnvloedt de groei van deze coöperatie (in ledenaantal) ledenbetrokkenheid?]	

Area of interest	Question	Probe
Motivation	What is your motivation to work at the coop?	Are there moments when it feels more or less motivating?
	[Wat is jouw motivatie om de shiften te doen bij de coop?]	[Zijn er momenten waarop je meer of minder gemotiveerd bent voor de shiften?] Do you think there are situations that make working in the coop more easy/challenging? (E.g., education, income, ...) [Denk je dat er omstandigheden zijn die het makkelijker/moeilijker maken? (Bv: opleiding, inkomen, ...)]

Area of interest	Question	Probe
Benefits + disadvantages	What, if any, advantages does the system of mandatory shifts have for you?	How important is the price to you as a member of the cooperative?
	[Welke, als die er zijn, voordelen heeft het systeem van verplichte shiften voor jou?]	[Hoe belangrijk is de prijs van de producten voor jou als lid van de coop?]
	Welke nadelen ervaar jij?	Can you give an example of something you learned or developed through this work?
		[Kan je een voorbeeld geven over iets dat je geleerd hebt dankzij de shiften?]
Mandatory character		Do you think that other members experience other kinds of (dis)benefits?
		[Denk je dat andere leden ook andere voor- of nadelen ondervinden?]
	How do you feel about the obligation to do shifts? [Hoe ervaar je het feit dat de shiften verplicht zijn?]	How does this feeling impact your overall engagement for the coop? [Hoe beïnvloedt dit gevoel je algemene engagement voor de coop?]
Shared goals	According to you, what do the mandatory shifts mean for the cooperative?	How does member labor relate to the broader goals of the cooperative?
	[Wat betekenen de shiften volgens jou voor de coöperatie?]	[Hoe dragen de shiften bij aan het algemene doel van de coöperatie?]
		Do you think that the cooperative would manage to operate without member labor?
		[Denk je dat de coop zou functioneren zonder de shiften?]

Area of interest	Question	Probe
Sense of community	How do you experience the relation with other members of the coop? [Hoe ervaar je de relatie met andere leden van de coop?]	How does working in shifts influence this relationship? [Hoe beïnvloeden de shiften de relatie met de andere leden?]
Shifts x participation	Before, we talked about member participation; how would you say the work at Coop Centraal influences your participation? [Laten we even terug gaan naar ledenbetrokkenheid in het algemeen. Hoe denk je dat de verplichte shiften jouw betrokkenheid beïnvloeden?]	

Area of interest	Question	Probe
Resources (time)	How does being a cooperant at coop influence your free time in your personal life? [Hoe beïnvloedt het lid zijn van de coop jouw vrije tijd?]	How do you feel about time being a possible barrier for participation in general? [Wat is jouw mening over tijdsgebrek als een mogelijke barrière voor participatie?] How do you feel about the time for the mandatory shifts being a barrier to become a cooperant? According to you, are the shifts a time barrier? [Denk je dat de tijd die men moet vrijmaken voor het shiften mensen kan afschrikken om coöperant te worden? Waarom?]

Area of interest	Question	Probe
Resources (skills/experience)	Do you feel like one needs to have certain skills/knowledge in order to participate in the coop?	Did you already have similar experience in a similar job before?
	[Heb je het gevoel dat een coöperant bepaalde skills of voorkennis nodig heeft om te participeren?]	[Had je hiervoor al ervaring in een gelijkaardige job?] Do you feel like you have adequate skills? [Vind je dat je de juiste vaardigheden hebt?] Do you think your contribution as participant in the coop is useful? [Ervaar je jouw bijdrage in de coop als waardevol?]
Resources (social capital)	Did you already know a lot of members before you joined? [Kende je al andere leden voordat je zelf lid werd?]	How do you think that knowing other people influence ones engagement for the coop? [Hoe beïnvloedt het feit dat men reeds andere mensen kent het engagement voor de coop?]

Area of interest	Question	Probe
Open space	Is there anything about member labor or participation that we haven't discussed but that you find important? [Zijn er nog andere aspecten over de shiften of participatie die we nog niet besproken hebben, maar die je toch belangrijk vindt?]	

Area of interest	Question	Probe
Closing statement	Ask for additional information (if not yet given): gender, age, family situation, member of other organizations, education [Vragen naar bijkomende informatie: gender, leeftijd, thuissituatie, andere engagementen, opleiding]	Do you know any other members that would be open for an interview? Maybe with a different (or negative) opinion about the working shifts? [Ken je andere leden die open zouden staan voor een interview? Misschien met een andere (of negatieve) mening over de shiften?]

Appendix C: Interviewees

Table C1: All respondents that were interviewed during our thesis. The respondent ID resembles their attributes: which organization they belong to and what their role is in this organization. Also their employment status and children living at home, and whether they attend the Annual General Meeting (AGM). If respondents had the same attributes, a number was given to distinguish between them.

ID	Cooperative (BEEScoop ; Coop Centraal ; Bab'I Market) or Febecoop	Role (Member; Daily Manager; Expert)	Employment status (Student; Retired; Working)	Children living at home (Children; No Children)	AGM attendance (Present ; Absent)	Number
BcMeWCA1	Bc	Me	W	C	A	1
BcMeWCA2	Bc	Me	W	C	A	2
BmMeRCA	Bm	Me	R	C	A	
BmMeRNcP1	Bm	Me	R	Nc	P	1
BmMeRNcP2	Bm	Me	R	Nc	P	2
CcMaWNcP	Cc	Ma	W	Nc	P	
CcMeRNcA	Cc	Me	R	Nc	A	
CcMeRNcP1	Cc	Me	R	Nc	P	1
CcMeRNcP2	Cc	Me	R	Nc	P	2
CcMeRNcP3	Cc	Me	R	Nc	P	3

ID	Cooperative (BEEScoop ; Coop Centraal ; Bab'I Market) or Febecoop	Role (Member; Daily Manager; Expert)	Employment status (Student; Retired; Working)	Children living at home (Children; No Children)	AGM attendance (Present ; Absent)	Number
CcMeRNcP4	Cc	Me	R	Nc	P	4
CcMeSNcA	Cc	Me	S	Nc	A	
CcMeWCA	Cc	Me	W	C	A	
CcMeWCP	Cc	Me	W	C	P	
CcMeXCP	Cc	Me	X	C	P	
CcMeWNCa	Cc	Me	W	Nc	A	
CcMeWNCp	Cc	Me	W	Nc	P	
FcEx	Fc	Ex	/	/	/	

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