

**Theses of Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation**

# **Forms of Cooperation in the Food Economy**

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## **I. Objective of the dissertation and definition of the topic**

In social science research, cooperation between economic agents has traditionally been a major focus, as a consequence of the fact that such collaborations not only have a beneficial effect on performance at the level of businesses, but also have a positive impact on the adaptability and pace of development of the macroeconomy as a whole (Gijssels and Bussels, 2014). Experience shows that countries and cultures in which economic actors are embedded in trust-based cooperative relationships perform better in terms of economic growth and are more engaged in terms of community relations (Putnam, 1993; Kiss, 2018; Kondo *et al.*, 2020).

Among the areas covered by research on cooperation, particular attention is given to *agricultural cooperatives*. This is partly due to the economic weight of such collaborations and also to the positive economic, social and, last but not least, environmental impacts that can be achieved through them (Verhofstadt *et al.*, 2014; Falkowski és Ciaian, 2016; Bareille *et al.*, 2017; Ajates Gonzalez, 2020; Candemir *et al.*, 2021). Agricultural cooperation has been shown to be an effective solution to a number of problems faced by food business operators, including weak bargaining power due to the size of farms and processing plants, vulnerability due to family business background, problems associated with the seasonality of production and perishability of agricultural products, and asymmetric information in product markets (Hobbs and Young, 2001; Hendrikse és Bijman, 2002; Ménard, 1998, 2012; Bijman *et al.*, 2012; Bijman and Hanisch, 2012; Milford, 2012; Cechin *et al.*, 2013; Tortia *et al.*, 2013).

Despite the proven benefits of food economy cooperatives, the level of cooperation among food industry players in the Member States that joined the European Union after 2004, including Hungary, is significantly lower than in the older Member States. This is mainly due to negative past experience with cooperation and low levels of social capital and trust (Chloupková *et al.*, 2003; Tisenkopfs *et al.*, 2011; Lissowska, 2013; Durić *et al.*, 2021). Different studies have shown that the totalitarian rule of the communist period in the CEE countries has created a negative attitude towards collective organisational forms, which has hindered the regeneration of social capital (Gijssels and Bussels, 2014; Csoba, 2017; Wolz *et al.*, 2020). This tendency was particularly pronounced in rural regions, given that it was mainly the rural population in agrarian areas that suffered the collectivisation imposed by the communist regime. (Falkowski *et al.*, 2017).

Despite the political turnaround that began in 1990, there has been no significant increase in preferences for cooperation in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. (Chloupková 2002;

Fałkowski *et al.*, 2017). Even today, cooperation between actors in the agricultural sector of the former socialist countries remains low, despite the fact that the European Union provides targeted subsidies to help establish and maintain certain forms of cooperation (see e.g. Chloupková *et al.*, 2003; Csáki and Forgács, 2007; Tisenkopfs *et al.*, 2011; Bijman *et al.*, 2012). In fact, experience shows that support for formal cooperation incentivised by subsidy policies often discourages informal bottom-up cooperation between food industry operators (Fałkowski and Ciaian, 2016; Rácz, 2017; Wolz *et al.*, 2020; Szabó G. *et al.*, 2021). Research on formal agricultural cooperatives in the European Union shows that *self-supporting cooperatives* that make use of less national and EU support predominate among the best-performing forms of cooperation. (Brusselaers *et al.*, 2014).

In addition to inherited difficulties, the food economy is also facing new challenges (e.g. liberalisation of the European and world markets for agricultural products, changing consumer expectations, new pathogens, emergence of new technologies, etc.) which require new adaptation strategies not only from agricultural producers in post-socialist countries but also from food business operators in European countries with a higher level of cooperation (Bijman *et al.*, 2014; Milczarek, 2002; Pascucci *et al.*, 2012; Kovách, 2022).

In the light of the above, *the main objective of this dissertation* was to comprehensively analyse cooperation in the Hungarian agricultural economy. Given the fact that research has shown that agricultural cooperatives are largely determined by historical, cultural, structural and mental factors, I have examined such cooperation over a *broad time frame*, from the beginning of state socialism to the present. I have adopted a similarly broad *definition of cooperatives*, expanding it to include informal partnerships (e.g. cooperation for the use of machinery and land, and partnerships for the exchange of labour on a courtesy basis) in addition to formal arrangements (e.g. cooperation between integrators, cooperatives, contractually regulated recurrent transactions). The rationale for this is that cooperation theories and empirical research on the subject suggest that, in certain circumstances, informal cooperative relationships based on personal trust between farmers can also be effective instruments of economic governance (Ruben *et al.*, 2006; Nábrádi, 2018; Grashuis and Cook, 2019).

In the context of cooperation between actors in the agricultural economy, I have sought to answer the following questions in particular, taking into account the theories on the subject and the results of national and international research reviewed:

- What trends and processes characterise the cooperation of actors in the European food economy today?
- What types of cooperation can be identified in the Hungarian food economy?
- Can we identify characteristic, dominant forms of Hungarian agricultural cooperation (e.g. based on membership, turnover, or sector)?
- What is the function of industry cooperatives for the direct participants in the cooperation and their environment?
- What are the socio-economic factors and drivers that influence the establishment and successful maintenance of cooperation in the food economy?

This dissertation seeks to answer these questions in five major structural units. In the first section, I provide an overview of the data and research methods used for the dissertation, which will be presented in detail in subsequent chapters. In the second section, I review theories that help inform the understanding of cooperative systems. In addition to economics-oriented approaches (such as *integration theories*, *business theories* and *hybrid theories*), sociological approaches are emphasised, including in particular *trust theories*, which provide a rich conceptual and theoretical basis for the interpretation of various partnerships. The aim of applying a multi-level and integrative approach has been to provide a more complex understanding of the various forms of agricultural cooperation, from the regulatory mechanisms that constitute their environment to their role in coordinating the economy and the behavioural mechanisms that are manifested at the level of the participants in such cooperative relationships.

*Integrative approaches* primarily contribute to a *macro-level* understanding of the mechanisms that influence the various forms of cooperation, the interactions between the subsystems that form the environment of cooperative activities, and the role of cooperatives in economic regulation. Business theories mainly provide conceptual and theoretical frameworks for understanding transactions and cooperations that serve business purposes. Rarely applied in the domestic context, *hybrid theories* provide an interpretative framework for examining the forms of cooperation and cooperation strategies brought about by new challenges (e.g. technological modernisation, changes in consumer preferences, increasing environmental challenges, etc.), by focusing on *economic* as well as *non-economic* drivers of cooperation (such as the social and geographical embeddedness of the various forms of cooperation). *Social approaches* to cooperation primarily aim to explore the motivations and behavioural mechanisms of the participants in cooperatives, and to better understand, and describe in a more structured way,

the collective action problems that may arise and the organisational solutions that emerge to address them.

In the third chapter of this dissertation I examine the forms of agricultural cooperatives prevalent in Hungary from the beginning of state socialism to the present day. This longer period has allowed for a more in-depth examination of the cultural, historical, mental, political and institutional determinants of food economy related cooperation – a deeper understanding of the manifestations of what Granovetter (1985, 1995) calls *structural embeddedness*.

The results of empirical research on which this dissertation is based are presented in a chapter, divided into three sub-sections. First, I attempted to explore the trust relations among domestic farmers through a secondary analysis of the data available from the Central Statistical Office's survey of subjective well-being. Then, I identified farmers' attitudes towards cooperation, the attributes that influence such attitudes and the main types of farmers involved in cooperatives, based on the analysis of relevant data from a farmer questionnaire survey. The chapter on the results empirical research included a description of the functional properties of the characteristic forms of cooperation in the Hungarian agricultural economy, focusing on the mechanisms regulating cooperatives, with particular emphasis on those encouraging participation and sanction mechanisms. The answers to the research questions and the conclusions drawn from the research findings on which the dissertation is based are presented in the final chapter of the dissertation.

## **II. Presentation of the methods used**

Due to the nature of the research questions, the dissertation *combines quantitative and qualitative research methods*. The quantitative methods used have allowed, first of all, to quantify trends in agricultural cooperation, to identify variables affecting such cooperation, and to characterise and typify participants in cooperatives. Qualitative methods have been used mainly to gain a more sophisticated understanding of the interactions between participants and of the cooperatives under study from the perspective of the actors (Balázs and Hőgye-Nagy, 2015). The qualitative and quantitative approaches were used in combination, in a *multi-method approach*, which allowed the results from the two types of research methods to complement each other for interpretation (Neulinger, 2016).

*A review of the literature* in economics, economic sociology and economic anthropology has been used to investigate the collaborations found in agricultural economy. The analysis of relevant *provisions of law and policy documents* has also helped to identify collaborations that

operate within formal organisational frameworks, while the *processing and analysis of secondary databases* has been the main source of information for identifying typical trends. Among the secondary databases used, special mention should be made of the statistics available in the Information Database of the Hungarian Central Statistical Office on registered and operating economic entities, the subsidy databases of the Hungarian State Treasury aimed at promoting cooperatives, the databases maintained by the Ministry of Agriculture on cooperation, and the time-series anonymised data on agricultural cooperatives of the National Tax and Customs Office.

The evaluation of farmers' participation in various forms of cooperation and of the variables influencing such participation was based on the *analysis of the database of the primary questionnaire survey* covering a sample of 1000 domestic producers<sup>1</sup>. In addition to *descriptive statistical analyses*, the identification of variables influencing cooperation between farmers has been facilitated by *statistical correlation analyses – correlation calculations* indicating the strength and direction of the relationships between variables, *analysis of variance* revealing the reasons behind the variance differences between variables, *principal component analysis* allowing the identification of influencing variables, and *cluster analysis* allowing the grouping and typification of the participants in the collaborations – using the SPSS statistical software platform.

The identification of the organisational level functional characteristics of existing agricultural cooperatives and a deeper understanding of farmers' attitudes towards cooperation in the agricultural areas of Hungary (Baranya, Hajdú-Bihar, Pest and Szabolcs-Szatmár Bereg counties) is based on the *analysis of semi-structured interviews* with farmers and members/management of agricultural cooperatives. The nearly 50 interviews allowed for a deeper insight into the perceptions and subjective experiences of the cooperatives, as well as for the validation of the results of the data analysis. Some of the interviews took the form of a series of 'follow-up interviews', which also provided an opportunity to monitor changes in attitudes towards cooperation<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The questionnaire-based survey was conducted under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Imre Kovách in the framework of the OTKA research project titled '„Földből élők: agrárszereplők, vidéki fejlődési pályák és vidékpolitikák Magyarországon' (*Living Off the Land: Agricultural Actors, Rural Development Paths and Rural Policies in Hungary*)' (NK 100682). (See detailed: Kovách, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> It was mainly the following two OTKA research projects, led by Dr. Katalin Kovács, that made it possible to conduct the interviews: The OTKA research 'Földből élők' (*Living Off the Land*) (ID number: 100675) and the OTKA research '„Üzemtípusok, kihívások, adaptációs irányok és ezek hatása a magyar vidékre' (*Types of*

The forms of agricultural cooperation that are typical of the domestic context are described in the dissertation through four *case studies*. In addition to interviews with farmers, the case studies were based on *participant observation* through an intensive involvement in the meetings of the participants in the various cooperatives (members' meetings, professional events and ad hoc meetings). The experiences recorded during participant observation in the form of field journals have primarily been used to complement the other methods of analysis, mainly in interpreting members' attitudes within the various organisational forms and the relations between members, and also between members and the management. The content analysis of documents describing important organisational events and happenings (e.g. organisational and operational rules, minutes of members' meetings, annual financial statements, member lists, internal records, etc.) also supported the analysis of agricultural cooperation in the domestic environment.

### **III. A thesis-like list of the findings**

In this dissertation, I have examined the various forms of cooperation in the food economy based on five research questions related to the creation, functioning and long-term sustainability of such cooperation. In the following, I present the findings and conclusions of the dissertation in thesis form, using the conceptual framework of theoretical approaches that seek to explain collaborations, in the context of the research questions.

#### ***III. 1. What trends and processes characterise the cooperation of actors in the European food economy today?***

A review of the literature and data on which the dissertation is based has shown that cooperation plays a significant role in the overall food economy of the European Union. This is confirmed by the high market share of agricultural cooperatives, which can be regarded as a classic form of cooperation, in agricultural trade in the European Union, ranging from 40 to 60 per cent, although this share varies considerably from one Member State to another (Bijman *et al.*, 2012; Ajates Gonzalez, 2020).

In the former Socialist Bloc countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the drivers for the development and operation of cooperation are very different from those that influence cooperation in Western and Southern Europe (Hagedorn, 2014). In the former socialist

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*Operations, Challenges, Directions of Adaptation and Their Impact on the Hungarian Countryside*) (K 132975). (See detailed: Kovács, 2016).

countries, *negative past experience* with cooperation forcibly imposed on farmers during the socialist era, as well as *persistently low levels of social capital and trust*, can be seen as strong influencing factors. Although the transition to a market economy in the post-socialist countries leaving collectivised agriculture behind would have required the immediate filling of the vacuum created by the loss of central coordination, and the bringing together and networking of producers, the period saw the eclipse and even devaluation of the forms of cooperation that had existed until then, due to the breakdown of institutional and interpersonal trust. This slowed down the move towards voluntary, grassroots cooperation in the former socialist countries. In the meantime, the development of cooperatives in the old EU Member States has followed a differentiated territorial development path: cooperation has played the most important role in the food economies of the Scandinavian and southern European countries, with a market share of 80-90 % in some sectors (vegetables, milk, pig farming) (Ajates-Gonzalez, 2020).

Accession to the European Union marked a new milestone in the development of agricultural cooperatives in the former socialist countries. The accession facilitated the emergence of many new forms of cooperation – Producer Marketing Organisations, Producer Groups, partnerships for irrigation, innovation steering groups, clusters, short food supply chains, etc. – thanks to the rural development subsidies available under the Common Agricultural Policy. The above forms of cooperation have taken root in the Hungarian context at different speeds and intensities depending on the branch of agriculture concerned. Self-sustaining forms of cooperation, capable of promoting the interests of commodity producers, have been established mainly in branches structured around international markets (poultry, sheep, milk), and their members are mainly *medium-sized agricultural operations*. It is important to point out that many of the partnerships set up and encouraged by the subsidy policy tend to disappear after the subsidy has been used, or are transformed into investor-owned enterprises, i.e. there are few self-sustaining cooperative organisations. The processes that characterise subsidised organisational forms suggest that the creation of sustainable cooperative organisations is a time-consuming process that goes beyond the development cycle, requiring decentralised discourses, face-to-face communication and awareness-raising at local level to build social capital, in addition to the subsidies that finance their operation and stable market and policy conditions.

Recent trends in the European food economy suggest that new challenges (in particular the liberalisation of world markets for agricultural products, changing consumer preferences, and the increasing importance of environmental protection requirements) are placing greater emphasis on the role of cooperation. The various collaborations that have until now been

isolated from each other in the European economic area are increasingly joining forces and creating cross-border *multidivisional networks / conglomerate integrations*, even covering the entire product chain. These organisational forms then continue to function as hybrid organisations that redefine the means of coordination, often integrating consumers, service providers, financial and R&D sector actors, in addition to different types of producers (Szabó G. 2011a, 2011b; Ajates Gonzalez, 2017; Bijman, 2018).

According to international research, the *economic strength and adaptability of these hybrid organisational structures* lie mainly in the combined use of coordination mechanisms, the main feature of which is that the cooperating parties share and jointly manage only a certain subset of their activities, while other activities remain coordinated independently (Ménard 2009, 2012). An analysis of the available literature has shown that the functioning of conglomerate-type integrations involving many actors is threatened mainly by the weakening of trust between the participating producers and by degenerative processes that undermine their cooperation. Addressing these requires more sophisticated and conscious mechanisms and interventions than are currently in place, both at the level of the organisations and at the macroeconomic level.

### ***III. 2. What types of cooperation can be identified in the Hungarian food economy? What are the main trends in cooperation?***

A review of agricultural cooperation systems in the pre-transition period shows that well-coordinated product chains and cooperation based on combined coordination mechanisms were also established in the state socialist economy and were effective in facilitating adaptation for the actors participating in such networks. However, their power to organise production could only be exercised in a moderated way, subordinated to bureaucratic control mechanisms. A historical review of domestic food industry cooperatives has also supported the assertion of integration theories (Kornai, 1989, 2012; Chikán, 2002, 2007) that other regulatory mechanisms can also play a role alongside the dominant form of coordination (bureaucratic coordination, as the case may be) and create “a huge variety of combinations”. The analysis of historical sources on forms of agricultural cooperation in the state socialist economy has also shown that ‘hybrid’ forms of cooperation existed already in the period of state socialism and even functioned as effective instruments for the conduct of transactions. In the Hungarian context, hybrid structures were manifested in the symbiotic cooperation between a large processing plant and the small farms operating in its vicinity, which played a key role not only in maintaining the balance of food production but also in preserving the political/power status quo. Hybrid forms are thus not

only forms of cooperation that are relevant in a market economy, but are also possible alternatives to the organisation of transactions at all times.

After the change of regime, the pace of development of food economy cooperatives slowed down in Hungary, and only the country's accession to the European Union in 2004 brought a turning point in this process. In terms of the main forms of cooperation, there are currently 360 agricultural cooperatives, 165 Producer Groups, 64 producer marketing organisations and hundreds of integrator collaborations involved in production coordination in Hungary. In addition, secondary organisations have been set up in the main sectors to coordinate the activities of the players in the product chains and to play a key role in the distribution of R&D services and innovations. However, the reforms of the EU's Common Agricultural Policy have also led to the emergence of alternative forms of cooperation (e.g. REL networks, partnerships for irrigation, innovation steering groups), which exist as *functional forms of cooperation* designed to address a specific sub-problem rather than as a multi-faceted, fully integrated approach.

Despite the emergence of new forms of cooperation, the dominant trend in domestic food cooperation is that the number of *formal collaborations and their membership is stagnating or decreasing*. The empirical studies carried out in the context of this dissertation show that this cannot be explained solely by a lack of trust in the various forms of cooperation on the producer side. Alongside the *concentration of land and wealth* associated with the decline in the number of active producers, the emergence of *stable forms of cooperation* in some sectors is a characteristic trend, which represents a shift towards self-sustainability. In these cases, a strategy is being consciously adopted to operate in the manner of hybrid organisations, i.e. to *exclude opportunistic members* who represent a risk for the organisation, to *ensure participation* in decision-making processes *in proportion to the economic strength of the various members*, and to apply so-called *selective incentives* to a narrower group of members.

The studies carried out in the context of this dissertation have confirmed that the forms of cooperation in the food industry show *sector-specific variations* in Hungary, which are closely linked to the characteristics of the products (in particular perishability, storability, substitutability and volume) and the degree of asset specificity of the production process. In Hungary, producers in the poultry sector are the most active in terms of cooperation, followed by sheep and pig producers and cereal producers. In these sectors, the vast majority of domestic agricultural operations are now involved in some form of conglomerate cooperation in the production of raw materials. Meanwhile, the degree of organisation of the domestic fruit and

vegetable sector is low, in contrast to international trends. There are very few examples of successful cooperation in the sector, with the exception of a few producer marketing organisations that have been successful in building vertical integration, benefiting from the EU's Common Agricultural Policy, and playing a role in innovation brokerage and technological modernisation of the sector. In the absence of production coordination managed by partnerships, the fruit and vegetable sector is likely to fall further behind on international markets.

The research carried out in the context of this dissertation has also confirmed the importance of unofficial forms of collective action, namely, *informal collaborations*, among actors in the domestic food economy, where *interpersonal trust* between cooperating parties is key to cooperation. These informal collaborations play a complex role. Their members pool resources where necessary, coordinate management tasks, act as a kind of *bank of convenience*, a *support network*, but do not evolve into entities that can be interpreted in market or subsidy policy terms.

### ***III. 3. Can we identify characteristic, dominant forms of Hungarian agricultural cooperation (e.g. based on membership, turnover, branch)?***

Contractually regulated *wholesale buyers for contract growing/integrators*, which have a long history in Hungary, have become a prominent feature of the domestic agricultural sector. The stability of integrator networks is created by the *multi-dependency of producers* (e.g. access to pre-financing of production, exclusive services and technologies); in this process, integrators rely as a resource on the social relations that form the environment of business transactions.

A defining feature of domestic agricultural cooperation is *partial integration*, i.e. cooperation limited to a single stage of the production process, typically to procurement in connection with the production of input materials, and to the sale of products. This cannot be explained exclusively by the lack of trust on the producer side, as revealed by previous empirical research (see, for example, Baranyai and Szabó, 2017; Szabó G., 2011a, 2011b), but rather by macro-level factors such as the exposure of product chains to global market processes and *their fragmentation despite mergers*. In some sectors (dairy and meat), so-called *vertically integrated networks* have started to emerge, which represent a form of cooperation spanning several stages of the product chain, based on a lasting commitment of the parties involved. The members of these networks are typically medium-sized agricultural operations. This is because smaller farms, which carry higher risks, and large farms, which are less inclined to cooperate because of their product volumes, are typically under-represented in cooperatives.

The research carried out for this dissertation has also shown that *informal networks* are of crucial importance for producers, irrespective of the size of their operations. In an economic and political environment that was undergoing restructuring after the regime change, these networks of family members, friends and acquaintances played an important regulating and stabilising role, enabling producers to access essential production resources, markets, new technologies, etc., to obtain information and knowledge, and to share their experiences. However, the field studies on which this dissertation is based have also shown that maintaining informal relations and *keeping the institution of favour exchange in motion requires considerable financial and non-financial efforts from the actors involved*. This may explain why increasingly professionalised agricultural operations are mobilising their favour exchange networks on an ad hoc basis, typically in times of crisis (e.g. harvest peaks, or dumping of products).

#### ***III. 4. What is the function of cooperation for the direct participants in the cooperation and their environment?***

The research carried out in the context of this dissertation identified a number of *economic benefits* resulting from formal cooperation, including higher *sales prices* negotiable through cooperation, predictable *purchasing and sales contracts* that better represent producers' interests, and *transactional savings* resulting from collective action (joint purchasing, sales, transport, etc.). It is important to point out that, despite the demonstrable economic benefits of agricultural cooperation, the domestic environment is dominated by *partial integration* focusing on the joint procurement of inputs and joint marketing of the commodity base produced by the members. Collective organisational forms (e.g. those aimed at creating and improving infrastructure for the production of inputs and for the storage, processing and movement of products) that increase production efficiency and require long-term, relational commitment of members are particularly prevalent in sectors where concentrated ownership dominates.

While the identification of the advantages of cooperation beyond the economic benefits and a clear understanding of the benefits at the membership level would be necessary to fine-tune the policy and support instruments designed to encourage cooperation, the difficulty in this respect is that the benefits of cooperation are mainly presented at the level of the organisations implementing the integration, while there is no information, collected according to uniform criteria and allowing for comparison, available in relation to the members of the integration. A

comprehensive analysis of this field would be possible if central registers of cooperatives were revised and data collection methodologies were harmonised and standardised.

Nevertheless, the empirical research carried out in the context of this dissertation has revealed some *non-economic aspects* of participation in collaborations. The food economy cooperatives studied for the purposes of this dissertation can be said to *have a positive impact on the level of knowledge, awareness and general access to information* of networked producers participating in them, regardless of their organisational background, thus increasing the adaptability of the agricultural operations. The *principle of solidarity and care* for members and immediate relatives is most evident in agricultural cooperatives, which are considered to be a classic form of cooperation. These forms of cooperation are characterised by *the provision of social care and rural development services for the local community in the environment of the collaborations*. In contrast, contract-based cooperation between integrators emphasises the guided modernisation of the integrated members and the knowledge and innovation brokering function.

The benefits provided by informal networks in the agricultural sector are characterised by a dynamic movement that varies over time. While during the period of the ‘shortage economy’ and in the years following the change of regime, informal networks played a key role in restructuring the economic and political environment, mainly by providing access to essential production resources (labour and technology), today their role is more dominant in the provision of information and support in crisis situations (such as weather emergencies and breakdown of production equipment).

### ***III. 5. What are the social and economic factors and drivers that influence the establishment and the subsequent successful maintenance of cooperation in the food economy?***

The research carried out in the context of this dissertation has identified a number of macro-, meso- and micro-level drivers that influence the establishment and successful maintenance of cooperation in the food economy. In the context of macro- and meso-level drivers, it is important to highlight *trust in the institutional, political and legal environment*, which, according to trust research (see for example Lissowska, 2013; Gijssels *et al*, 2014), has a strong impact on the establishment and sustainable operation of economic cooperation. The research findings presented in this dissertation show that while interpersonal trust among domestic producers is strong, trust in institutions is persistently low, thus enhancing the role of

collaborations based on personal commitment and direct agreement between the parties involved.

In terms of micro-level drivers, the dissertation confirms that the way in which producers participate in food economy cooperatives is determined by a combination of the *economic characteristics* (sales revenues and land) and certain *socio-demographic parameters* of the producers. Professional agricultural operations with a larger economic size are more likely to participate in formal collaborations that provide market access, while farm operators with lower turnover are more likely to be members of cooperative organisational forms that provide information and advocacy, and to rely more on informal forms of cooperation.

*Among sociodemographic variables, the most important factor influencing the willingness to cooperate is the level of education of the farm operations manager:* producers with more knowledge are more likely to recognise how participation in formal business networks can enhance competitiveness and adaptability. However, data from primary data collection processed in this dissertation has shown that age – identified as a key variable in relevant research (see for example Wolz *et al.*, 2020; Baranyai *et al.*, 2015; Szentesi *et al.*, 2021) – does not have a statistically significant effect on the willingness of domestic farmers to cooperate.

However, the data from the questionnaire-based survey among producers, analysed in this dissertation, has confirmed *the role of trust in influencing the level of cooperation activity*, in line with international and national research on the subject. Surveys show that trust-based commitment of members is typically found in cooperative organisational forms with stronger business commitment (e.g. Producer Marketing Organisations, Producer Groups), given that aligned and relation-specific investments by the cooperating parties can pay off in long-term relationships. At the same time, research shows that forms of formal cooperation which aim at information exchange and advocacy are maintained even at lower levels of trust, given the low level of risk associated with participation in these forms of cooperation.

Representative of typical forms of cooperation in the domestic food economy, the organisational case studies presented in this dissertation also identified the *degree of embeddedness* of participants in cooperatives as a specific influencing factor. The case studies confirmed that *embeddedness in the social network is not only an important organising force in local community-supported collaborations, but also an effective coordination tool in hierarchical, contract-based collaborations*. Experience shows that food economy cooperatives embedded in a system of local values and norms offer more opportunities for monitoring and controlling

collective and individual action and for applying incentive and sanction mechanisms than less embedded forms of cooperation.

At the same time, it is important to point out that although a trust-based social network is an essential pillar for sustaining cooperation, in cooperative organisational forms that rely on purely personal interactions and affective, emotional trust, changes of individuals can easily disrupt the organisational order and disintegrate even trust-based and essentially bottom-up forms of cooperation. Based on the case studies presented, *rational trust in the expertise* of leadership/management is a more important component than affective trust for long-lived and durable collaborations.

The findings of this dissertation, which offer a more nuanced picture of the attitudes and motivations of food economy actors towards cooperation and the factors influencing them, may provide valuable insights for a better understanding and further refinement of the subsidy policy and economic governance instruments that facilitate the establishment and maintenance of cooperation.

## IV. iDEa certificate



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### List of publications related to the dissertation

#### Hungarian books (2)

1. Szerk. Kemény, G., **Rácz, K.**: A mezőgazdasági kisüzemek jellemzői és fejlesztési lehetőségei. Agrárgazdasági Kutató Intézet, Budapest, 121 p., 2017. (Agrárgazdasági Könyvek sorozat, ISSN 2061-8204) ISBN: 9789634916000
2. Szerk. Biró, S., **Rácz, K.**: Agrár- és vidékfejlesztési együttműködések Magyarországon. Agrárgazdasági Kutató Intézet, Budapest, 145 p., 2015. (Agrárgazdasági Könyvek sorozat, ISSN 2061-8204) ISBN: 9789634915959

#### Hungarian book chapters (6)

3. **Rácz, K.**: Termelői csoportok Magyarországon.  
In: A szövetkezés-együttműködés akadályai, feltételei és fejlesztési lehetőségei a magyar élelmiszer-gazdaságban. Szerk.: Szabó G. Gábor, Baranyai Zsolt, Agroinform Kiadó, Budapest, 173-192, 2017. ISBN: 9786155666162
4. **Rácz, K.**: "Mi itt a földhöz vagyunk kötve": Agrárgazdasági folyamatok a Fehérgyarmati térségben.  
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5. Keller, J., **Rácz, K.**, Váradi, M. M.: Községi gazdaságfejlesztés a vidéki Magyarországon.  
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6. **Rácz, K.**: A kapcsolati viszonyok szerepe az agrárágazatban: Egy dél-dunántúli kistérség példáján.  
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