



# Factors that contribute to satisfaction in cooperator-cooperative relationships

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## ABSTRACT

This study evaluates whether family farmers in Rio Grande do Sul (Brazil) are satisfied with the performance of cooperatives regarding the Brazilian agribusiness competitiveness, and if they understand the association and the advantages of cooperative relations. The research method applied herein was quantitative, based on a survey-type study. The sample comprised 271 establishments of RS family farmers. Questionnaires were applied during the first semester of 2017. Data were statistically analyzed using the PSPP software. Results indicate that (a) associates/cooperators are satisfied with cooperative activities and with the positive impacts of the cooperative relationship; (b) they consider the associate/cooperator farmer-cooperative relationship to be 'dispensable'; (c) they do not clearly differentiate cooperative organizations from private undertakings; (d) they agree with the principles of cooperativism and the social role played by the cooperative, although they recognize that it is a limited social action and not a priority; (e) they seek socio-economic advantages from cooperativism. Therefore, family farmers in Rio Grande do Sul perceive cooperativism under a financial-interest bias and not according to doctrine.

## 1. Introduction

Cooperativism, a financial and social system that seeks to organize and distribute wealth, is an organizational model with a philosophy that appeals to the transformation of communities into more rightful places for people to live together (Etgeto et al., 2005). Cooperatives follow a model based on the world's first cooperative, the Rochdale Probostee Society, 1844, England (Sousa, 2009). The first registered cooperative in Brazil was a consumption cooperative named *Sociedade Econômica dos Funcionários Públicos de Ouro Preto*, created in Ouro Preto, 1889. In properties comprising agri-food businesses, the first cooperatives appeared in 1906 (Sousa, 2009).

In Brazil, cooperatives are governed by Federal Law n° 5764 (1971). They are defined as societies of persons, constituted in order to provide services to its members, without the objective of profit. This law states seven fundamental cooperative principles: (1) free voluntary affiliation; (2) democratic management by members; (3) economic participation of members; (4) autonomy and Independence; (5) education, training and

information; (6) intercooperation; (7) commitment to the community (Brasil, 1971a, 1971b; OCERGS/SESCOOP/RS, 2012).

Agricultural cooperatives are formed by rural or agropastoral producers and fishing associations. With their own means of production, these cooperatives aim to obtain gains in unifying their activities (OCERGS/SESCOOP/RS, 2012). They play a social role, seeking to reduce poverty and improve the quality of life of the associates/cooperators, promoting local development and social and productive inclusion, such as the reduction of unemployment levels, provides insertion in local and global markets, increasing possibilities to face competition with large-scale exploration and business units (Ribeiro, 2012; Lins and Pires, 2005). Organizing as cooperatives is a way to improve competitiveness among family farmers (Nascimento et al., 2016). In cooperatives, individual competences are unified in favor of a common group objective, overcoming individualistic behaviors (Silva et al., 2014).

However, it is currently difficult to obtain cooperatives that aim at social change while still remaining market-competitive. Theoretically,

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cooperatives must meet the needs of all, instead of the individual interests of its members. Nevertheless, in practice, several problems are noted, such as (a) cultivating the idea of a common good in a society that stimulates individuality and the desire for possession (Drumond, 2010); (b) self-management complexity, since associates/cooperators must care, not only for the end-activity – their specialty – but for the entire insertion within the market, which demands administrative and marketing knowledge (Sousa, 2009); (c) ensuring that cooperative growth does not alter its fundamental conception, preserving its social nature, instead of monopolizing decision-making, exploiting its employees and becoming a private-commercial enterprise (Sousa, 2009).

As a way to improve cooperative efficiency, monitoring and measuring the effective practice of the cooperative principles is paramount, since this guarantees the maintenance of their identity and allows for enterprise growth without abandoning the guidelines that distinguish them from others (Drumond, 2010). In this context, the objective of this study was to evaluate whether associate/cooperator family farmers in Rio Grande do Sul (Brazil) are satisfied with cooperative performance in the Brazilian agribusiness competitiveness scenario and if they understand the link and the advantages of cooperative relations. This research has as specific objectives the following: to verify the profile of associate/cooperator family farmers in Rio Grande do Sul, identify the perception of cooperative family farmers regarding the differentials of cooperatives compared to private companies, verify that cooperative principles are being applied in the cooperator-cooperative relationship and, finally, examine whether information asymmetry is noted in the cooperative-cooperative relationship.

This study is justified because among the main problems encountered in cooperative management, cooperatives compete with capitalist companies from different sectors and, at the same time, must respond to the desires of their partners. In contrast, the participation of cooperative members in administration is low and cooperative members exhibit opportunistic behaviors (Brandão and Breitenbach, 2019).

To answer this problem, the article is organized as follows: (1) Introduction, containing the problem and the research justification and objectives; (2) Theory, which contextualizes the cooperative sector in the global scenario, with a focus on cooperatives in agribusiness; (3) Material and methods; (4) Results and discussions (subdivided into: associate/cooperator family farmer profiles in Rio Grande do Sul; Motivations, satisfaction and impacts of cooperator family farmers association in cooperatives in Rio Grande do Sul; Differences between private and cooperative companies: the perception of cooperator family farmers; Cooperative principles in cooperator-cooperative relationships; Information asymmetry in cooperator-cooperative relationship); and finally, (5) Research conclusions.

## 2. Theory

The cooperative model is capable of occurring in many different contexts and business forms, from retail to agriculture and agroindustry (Gnezdova et al., 2016) from manufacturing (Jules and Saadat, 2016) to financial services (Mckillop et al., 2020), from small collectives of artisanal workers to large regional organizations (Eaton et al., 2017; Buechler, 2019). When it was created, in a scenario of scarcity of resources of every order, the cooperative movement aimed at changing the basis by which the private business were undertaken, from voluntary association based on self-help. This is why cooperatives provide a different normative explanation of business objectives from the standard neoclassical enterprise model. Conceptually, cooperatives have normalized ethical principles and values, rooted in an ethics based on the principle of mutuality, while competing on an equal footing in the very market that seeks to reform (Davis and Worthington, 1993). As a positive example, we mention Scandinavia, which has a particularly promising context to draw inspiration from effective cooperation and where one can find ample examples of what is more recently referred to as "shared value creation" (Strand and Freeman, 2013).

Specifically, agro-industries have cooperative organizations that are facilitators to integrate with the market, representing unique combinations that refer to the standards of collective organization that seek equity (Chamberlain and Anseeuw, 2019). Cooperators are sometimes referred to as rural social entrepreneurs (Lan et al., 2014), who are the main drivers and leaders of agricultural cooperative development, with some extraordinary capacities, such as self-learning and knowledge acquisition, applying knowledge to practice and innovation and creativity (Huang and Cui, 2009).

Cooperative collective management, together with a steady flow of knowledge and learning (formal and informal), contributes to the creation of more sustainable and resilient agricultural models, tending to thrive in rural areas (Van Dijk et al., 2015). They also raise awareness of environmental, technical, economic, and social issues, allowing farmers to increase their confidence in dealing with issues that have a direct effect on their ability to adapt to new circumstances, innovate, and collaborate (De los Ríos et al., 2016). In addition, their social networks are an important source for information and knowledge related to production and business opportunities, are the important vehicles for the mobilization of local resources and their cooperators can obtain significant economic and social benefits from participation (Figueiredo and Franco, 2018a).

Although it is evident that the presence of agricultural cooperatives varies considerably according to the country, region, food network and product. Studies show that there is no agriculture developed in a country where agricultural cooperatives do not play a role crucial in almost all aspects of food production and trade (Bijman et al., 2012).

The cooperation is recognized by the objective of unify different and individual capacities for a common objective of a group, and it can overcome individualistic behaviors (Silva et al., 2014), so, the relationship between farmer and cooperative will only be positive if the cooperative manages and serves the common interests (Boesche, 2005). Specifically in the family farming sector, cooperativism is an alternative for market insertion, making possible to face competition with business units (Lins and Pires, 2005; Ribeiro et al., 2012).

Among the principles of cooperativism is the need for cooperative management by members, which in this case, they are the farmers themselves. However, they need to take care of their private farms, subsistence activities, as well as carry out market transactions, which requires technical and managerial knowledge (Sousa, 2009). This harms their participation in cooperative actions, since there is a time limitation.

One aspect that challenges the management of cooperatives is that when the participant initiates the bond, it's by economic interest. Without the loyalty of the participant, cooperatives lose their sense of existence and lose operational and scale efficiency (Ferreira and Arbage, 2016). From a legal point of view, the participant has duties and obligations, such as the cooperative, and the exercise of these duties is fundamental for its proper functioning, which includes responsibility for the efficiency of the cooperative (BRASIL, 1971a, 1971b).

Cooperatives are dual organizations. They comprise social but also financial objectives that define and guide their operations. They have individuality and commonality as rival forces, which form an inherent contradiction in cooperative operations. However, due to their need for democracy and a flexible structure, individuality operating in a cooperative can deteriorate the cooperative community itself (Puusa et al., 2016). As a way to resolve this issue, the authors suggest the search for a balance between the conflicting needs and expectations of an individual member and the cooperative, in an effort to apply modern business management. This may be termed the "new dual nature" of cooperatives (Puusa et al., 2016).

In a theoretical research with 56 publications (in the past 15–20 years), was found growing evidence of an uneven distribution of benefits between small and large producers also was report that the organizational growth of cooperatives is linked to the increase in heterogeneity in the attitudes and objectives of their members, especially regarding

commitment and participation (Grashuis and Su, 2019). This survey highlights farmers' cooperatives as complex and failing commercial organizations, but which have a positive impact on their members, especially related to price, income, quality, input purchase and income.

Thus, by their very nature, cooperatives are complex organizations. In addition, it should be considered that, in most developing countries, after decades of state regulation and protection, cooperatives were exposed, in the early 1990s, to the market and international competition, and had to react with technical modernization, innovation organizational, strategy and business models. This was the case for South African wine cooperatives, as exemplified by Ewert et al. (2014).

However, the most recurrent challenge of modern cooperativism is making cooperatives instruments of changes and social participation while at the same time being competitive in the market to ensure economic viability. There is a fine line between cooperation versus competition, collective versus individual interests (Breitenbach et al., 2017). Therefore, cooperatives find it difficult to construct the idea of a common good in a society that stimulates individuality and the desire for ownership (Drumond, 2010).

Faced with this complexity, the posture of many cooperatives has been purely mercantile. That is, they enter the market as cooperatives, but they act as private companies, damaging the cooperative system as a whole. This posture is not adequate and does not guarantee the good performance of cooperatives (Nascimento, 2000). This is because the legitimacy of a cooperative is to be faithful to the cooperative principles (Drumond, 2010), i.e., the future of the cooperative depends on the active participation of the cooperative and respect for their collective interests (Breitenbach et al., 2017). An example of this is that the greater the effectiveness of the Fiscal Council of a cooperative, the greater the loyalty of the participants tends to be (Ferreira and Arbage, 2016).

Contributes to the problems of cooperative and participants relationships the existence of asymmetries in cooperative ownership information, reducing the members confidence in transacting with cooperatives (Bertolin et al., 2008). This is relevant since if the member is satisfied with the conduct of the bond by the cooperative he will commit himself and work for common interests (Breitenbach et al., 2017).

Brandão and Breitenbach (2019) pointed out that the main difficulties in the management of cooperatives are that they must be competitive and, at the same time, faithful to cooperative principles, making management of cooperatives find difficulties to compete in oligopolized markets. This research showed a low participation of the participants in managerial processes and decision-making on the cooperatives, and they exhibit opportunistic behavior and act intentionally to benefit themselves from transactions with the cooperatives.

The low participation of members in cooperative decisions points to poor management, where there is no effort to involve members and hold them accountable for the organization (Brandão and Breitenbach, 2019). There is also a self-exemption from the responsibility of the cooperated farmers, who adopt the logic that, by not opining and getting involved, they are also not responsible for what happens. Therefore, balancing rapid decision-making with democracy and wide discussion is a difficult but crucial task.

To solve the managerial problems of cooperatives, research points out the following suggestions: (a) separate ownership and control through professional management; (b) entrust the boards of directors with the new role of ensuring compliance with the strategic planning and social functions of the cooperative; (c) increase the functions of the fiscal council (monitor and guide periodic audits of the cooperative with the help of experienced professionals); (d) adjust the contractual relations between the members and the cooperative to allow new standards of fidelity and cooperation; (e) respect and be faithful to cooperative principles, inform members how financial gain distribution occurs, as well as how property rights and the distribution of power for decision-making are established; (f) change the institutional environment (guaranteeing the economic efficiency and social effectiveness of

cooperatives); and (g) adjusting legislation, leading to the opening of capital (Machado Filho et al., 2004; OCB, 2004; Maciel et al., 2018).

Complementary to this, Brandão and Breitenbach (2019) have identified that some problems are already being solved by cooperatives that have sought consultancies in the areas of management; democratization and decentralization of decisions; adopting participatory methodologies; increase membership; establish partnerships with other cooperatives and organizations; and improve leadership and technical assistance.

### 3. Material and Methods

A quantitative research method was adopted in this investigation, classified as a Survey-type study. Data was obtained regarding the perception of family farmers in Rio Grande do Sul (RS), Brazil, on the conformity of rural cooperative actions with the respective principles. Results were quantified after the application of a structured questionnaire in a representative sample of the research population. Quantitative research focuses on objectivity, understanding reality solely by analyzing data gathered with standardized instruments (Fonseca, 2002).

Surveys aims to acquire data and information on characteristics, actions or opinions of a specific group of people, indicated as representative of a target population, through a research instrument, usually a questionnaire (Pinsonneault and Kraemer, 1993). Quantitative descriptions of a population from a predefined instrument, the questionnaire, are sought. Considering its purpose, this survey is classified as descriptive because it seeks to identify attitudes or opinions of a population. The hypothesis proposed is not causal, instead it aims to verify whether perceptions concur with reality (Pinsonneault and Kraemer, 1993). The type of survey adopted was intersectional, since the collection of population data was performed in a single time interval (Bryman, 1989; Babbie, 1999).

Qualitative analysis was used as support to quantitative research. This approach helped to understand the contexts in which multiple individual interactions are inserted (Guerra, 2006), as well as explain aspects of reality that cannot be quantitatively assessed, focusing on the perception and elucidation of social relations dynamics (Fonseca, 2002).

For organization purposes, the study is divided into five phases:

Phase 1 – Determine the location and target population: The area covered by the survey was the RS because it is a state with 77% of agricultural establishments belonging to family farming (IBGE, 2017). To carry out this research, only family farming properties with agri-food businesses were considered. Associate/cooperator family farms were profiled because: historically, the sector has been linked to the country's economic development – they are a supplier of basic foods to the domestic market (Savoldi and Cunha, 2010); generally, they have less bargaining power and difficulties with scale, which increases the importance of association and cooperative models to overcome the difficulties of economic reproduction; comparing the share of family and non-family agriculture in the GDP (Gross Domestic Product) of Brazil and RS, the contribution of the former was higher (IBGE, 2017), as the importance of family agribusiness in the total agribusiness of RS in 2003 was 55% (Grando, 2011); the cooperatives' focus in the state is mostly family farming establishments (defined by Law n° 11326 of July 24, 2006).

Phase 2 – Theoretical deepening and questionnaire development: reviewing the literature in order to better understand the issue, as well as constructing the questionnaire summarized in [Frame 01](#).

Phase 3 – Sampling estimation and questionnaire application: Taking into consideration the totality of establishments of family agriculture in the state, simple random sampling was determined on categorical variables. Based on the sample calculation, the need to obtain 271 questionnaires was confirmed: for each family establishment a single application was performed. The questionnaires were applied only to family farms associated/cooperator with at least one cooperative, i.e. the selected sample only comprises families with businesses linked to



**Frame 01**

Structure of the questionnaire used for data collection and empirical research tool.

Subitems	Aspects addressed
Part 1 – characteristics	1 – Gender; 2 – Age; 3 – Instruction; 4 – Affiliation time; 5 – Activities performed in the property; 6 – Property size; 7 – Farmers are associated in how many cooperatives.
Part 2 – cooperativism and associate/cooperator farmer	8 – Impact of establishing a relationship with a cooperative; 9 – Satisfaction regarding cooperative performance; 10 – Cooperative importance; 11 – Impact of associate/cooperator farmer -cooperative relationship rupture; 12 – Objectives/principles of cooperatives with more presence.
Part 3 – associate/cooperator farmer's perception	13 – Decisions made by the cooperative; 14 – Definition of a cooperative; 15 – Education and training for associate/cooperator farmers; 16 – Social responsibility; 17 – Cooperative X Private enterprise; 18 – Cooperative competitiveness; 19 – Motives that lead to becoming a associate/cooperator.

cooperatives. Associates/cooperators were selected from all subregions established by the Organization of Cooperatives of Rio Grande do Sul, namely Vale do Taquari, Rio Pardo and Região da Produção, the Metropolitan area, Saa, Northwest, South, Campaign and Central (OCERGS/SESCOOP/RS (2020)).

Sampling estimation followed this formula:

$$n = \frac{N \cdot Z^2 \cdot p \cdot (1 - p)}{Z^2 \cdot p \cdot (1 - p) + e^2 \cdot (N - 1)}$$

Where: n – calculated sample; N – population; Z – normal standardized variable associated with the confidence level; p – true probability of the event; e – sample error. A sample error of 5%, a confidence level of 90%, and a population of 378,546 family establishments was established.

Questionnaires were applied from January to March 2017. The questions were designed in a multiple-choice fashion.

Phase 4 – Statistical analysis: the public domain program PSPP was used. The program was developed on the principles of the IBM SPSS Statistics, private domain. A univariate analysis was performed, so each variable would be processed on its own. It provided characterization or trend of variable data.

Phase 5 – Data analysis: existing discussions and information from previous research was used as base for the analysis and comparison with primary data obtained.

### 3.1. Case study: cooperator family farms in Rio Grande of Sul

The state of Rio Grande do Sul (RS) (Fig. 1) occupies a prominent place in the history of cooperatives in Brazil, as one of the first states to found cooperatives and with the oldest cooperative, founded in 1902, still in operation (OCB, 2020). From 1906, agricultural cooperatives emerged in this state, idealized by rural producers and immigrants, especially of German and Italian origin. These actors brought a cultural baggage from their countries of origin, comprising the associative work and experience of community family activities, motivating them to



**Fig. 1.** Geographical location of the research – Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil.  
Source: Prepared by the authors based on OBSCOOP (2021).

organize themselves into cooperatives.

The Rio Grande do Sul state has 437 active cooperatives, 2,9 million associates/cooperators and 63,8 thousand employees (OCB, 2020). Of this 198 are considered agricultural cooperatives, as shown in Fig. 1 (OBSCOOP, 2021). With 350,2 thousand associates/cooperators and 36,6 thousand employees the main activities of this agricultural cooperatives are: (1) grains; (2) milk; (3) inputs/supplies; (4) retail; (5) vegetables; (6) animal protein; (7) wine and grapes; (8) sheep wool (OCB, 2020). As for revenues, 35% bill up to 10 million per year, 28% from 10 to 100 million per year, 18% from 100 to 500 million per year and 19% above 500 million per year and in the period from 2016 to 2019 they achieved 19% of new associates/cooperators members, 6,9% in their assets and increases of 45% in leftovers.

## 4. Results and discussion

This section presents the results of the empirical research carried out with cooperator family farms in Rio Grande do Sul, and a discussion based on other studies and theories already published on the subject of cooperativism. Initially, the associate/cooperator family farmer profiles in Rio Grande do Sul are presented and discussed, followed by discussions on motivation, satisfaction and cooperator family farmer associations impacts in cooperatives in Rio Grande do Sul. This section also contextualizes the perception of cooperator family farmers regarding the differences between private and cooperative companies. Finally, the principles and the information asymmetry in cooperator-cooperative relationship are discussed.

### 4.1. Profile of associate/cooperator family farmers in Rio Grande do Sul

This section presents and discusses associate/cooperator family farmer profiles of those who participated in the research. The main selected aspects comprised gender, age, education level, number of cooperative organizations to which the interviewees belong to and time of participation. A total of 88.11% were male and 11.89% female from sampled associate/cooperator family farmers. Most of the family nuclei, 60.66%, have a relationship only with an agricultural cooperative, while 39.34% are tied to two or more. Regarding the length of these relationships, 25% of respondents have been associated for less than 10 years; 50.41% for 10–20 years; and 24.59% from 20 to 30 years.

The results found in the survey on male preponderance are surprising, surpassing the Brazilian average where the cooperative member distribution by gender is of 64% of men (OCB, 2020). This reflects a logic of naturalized invisibility in society that cancels the perception of women as an integral part of productive work that generates income beyond family subsistence (Silva, 2019). Based on this assumption, gender inequality is noted as socially constructed and rooted in the rural environment on which the sexual division of labor is based. This demonstrates the fragility of women and low social recognition as farmers (Silva, 2019).

The discussion on the issue of gender in rural areas has been increased due to the emergence of laws and debates on equality in several countries, such as Spain (Nicolas et al., 2016) and Brazil (Silva, 2019), for example. This is the case with the establishment of quotas for women in the direction of private companies or in social economy, such as cooperatives. These quotas are justified by equity and social justice, but also by an economic point of view, since improvements in efficiency are noted when women participate in decision-making processes (Nicolas et al., 2016).

Regarding the other aspects surveyed, Table 1 shows the distribution according to age group and instruction level.

Most interviewees are over 51 years old. The ageing of the rural population and the migration of young people to the city is a challenge for reproduction, food production and social organization in Brazil's countryside. Most farmers intend to continue farming, but few family farms have any members interested in property succession (Fischer

**Table 1**

Age group and instruction level of associate/cooperator family farmers in Rio Grande do Sul.

Age group	Frequency (%)	Instruction Level	Frequency (%)
60 years and over	13.52	Without schooling/Incomplete kindergarten	0.41
51–60 years	40.57	Full kindergarten/Incomplete elementary	61.48
41–50 years	18.03	Full elementary/Incomplete High School	8.61
31–40 years	15.98	Full High School/Incomplete College	22.13
21–30 years	11.89	Full College/Incomplete Graduate School	7.38
		Full Graduate School	0.0

et al., 2016). Moreover, the elderly have a higher satisfaction degree with broad social ties, ergo, they tend to value more social aspects of cooperativism (Jahn, 2013).

As for schooling, a basic education level (full kindergarten or incomplete elementary education) is the most representative, covering more than 60% of respondents. Although illiteracy is not very common in southern rural communities, most of its inhabitants have only studied elementary school (specifically up to the 4th grade) (Dos Anjos and Caldas, 2015). In the case of Rio Grande do Sul, demographic census data from the year 2000 indicate that 50.16% of the total rural population, aged 7 or more, have between 4 and 7 years of schooling, which corresponds to the complete elementary school (Dos Anjos and Caldas, 2015).

Similar data were reported in Nigeria, for example, where the average years of schooling for associate farmers ranged from 6.3 ( $\pm 4.2$ ) years to 7 ( $\pm 5.1$ ) years (Kehinde et al., 2018). The survey also warns that the shorter study periods corroborate reduced technology adoption by farmers (Kehinde et al., 2018). Therefore, there is evidence that schooling is a valuable skill in adopting new technologies constantly offered to the market and agriculture (Rosegrant et al., 2018). Decisions of agricultural families are made based on the level of knowledge they have about reality, which can be either restricted or driven by their education level (Rosegrant et al., 2018). This data does not propose an encouraging scenario considering those who should be the protagonists of the development and future of rural spaces (Dos Anjos and Caldas, 2015).

### 4.2. Motivations, satisfaction and impacts of cooperator family farmer associations in cooperatives in Rio Grande do Sul

The second stage of the research identified which reasons and factors encourage associate/cooperator family farmers with agri-food businesses to join agricultural cooperatives (Table 2). In addition, a discussion on what the satisfaction of cooperative farmers with cooperatives is, what was the positive impact of the association and what would be the consequence of breaking the association is also performed.

The main aspects that contributed to establishing cooperative relationships were: to buy products at lower rates; to facilitate product marketing; to access payment benefits (quota); and to access financial advantages. A “financial” bias is observed in all four items, reinforcing the economic perspective as the main link between the associate/cooperator family farmers and the cooperative. Therefore, the reasons that lead farmers to seek a cooperative are of individual rather than collective nature.

The wine cooperatives in Portugal are good examples of profit-oriented companies that work for the development of society / community and operate in a competitive economic market environment. To overcome in difficult times, they have institutional and community support during the process of developing social entrepreneurship in

**Table 2**

Reasons for associate/cooperator family farmers in Rio Grande do Sul to establish a cooperative relationship.

Reasons to start a cooperative relationship	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)
Facilitate product marketing for rural producers	96.7	3.3
Access financial advantages	94.3	5.7
Buy products at lower rates	93.9	6.2
Access payment benefits when purchasing	91.0	9.0
Since they are references in the branch in which they work	88.9	11.1
Friendship between cooperator family farmers and cooperative employees	84.4	15.6
Members receive special treatment	67.6	32.4
Appreciation for teamwork	63.1	36.9
Friendship between cooperator family farmers	59.4	40.6
Identification and admiration for them	58.6	41.4
In need for help, they provide a support net	54.9	45.1
Associate/cooperator farmers work together; appreciates helping others	53.3	46.7
Seeking to fight and protest alternative ways of working	46.7	53.3
Workplace is pleasant	41.0	59.0
Has no other option	34.4	65.6
Benefits from training courses	28.7	71.3
Benefits from guaranteed work	23.4	76.6

terms of political initiatives, resources, financial and even emotional support from other stakeholders (Figueiredo and Franco, 2018b). In this case, the factors that indicate greater satisfaction of cooperative members are not related to economic factors, but they relate to the compatibility among members, selection of partners, human resources, power and control, as well as the development of organizations, communities and their members (Figueiredo and Franco, 2018b).

Table 3 shows the satisfaction of associate/cooperator family farmers with their cooperatives, the observed impact on the farmer when establishing a cooperative relationship, cooperativism importance for the associate/cooperator family farmers, and the impact for cooperator farmers of a possible and hypothetical cooperative dissolution.

Satisfaction with cooperative performance is considered average or high for 86% of respondents. In contrast, the initial positive impact of the cooperative relationship on the farmer is considered low or medium for most of them. Também a maioria dos agricultores associados apontam que se eles se desassociassem da cooperativa não teriam impactos negativos para a propriedade rural. Even so, when asked about the importance of cooperativism, 87.7% affirm that it has medium or high importance.

Generally, the farmer establishes a cooperative relationship seeking better results and it should result in a positive sum if the cooperative can meet the common interests (Boesche, 2005). The associate, satisfied with the actions of the cooperative, will be committed and working for common interests (Breitenbach et al., 2017).

**Table 3**

Associate/cooperator family farmers' satisfaction in Rio Grande do Sul regarding the performance of *gaucho* cooperatives and cooperative relationship impact (%).

	None (a)	Little (a)	Medium (a)	High (a)
Satisfaction with cooperative performance	0	13.5	77.5	9.0
Positive impacts of the cooperative relationship for associate/cooperator family farmers	0	28.7	66.8	4.5
Cooperative importance for associate/cooperator family farmers	0	12.3	74.2	13.5
Negative impacts for associate/cooperator family farmers of disruption of cooperator-cooperative relationship	22.5	45.9	28.7	2.9

Regarding the impact of the dissolution of the relationship, there is a little to none assessment on behalf of farmers. This demonstrates a scarce need in the mutual relationship. If the links between the two are broken, the impact is considered to be low or null for both the associate/cooperator and the cooperative. The results summarized in Table 3 point out contradictions in farmer positioning and perception. They consider that the cooperatives of which they are members do not positively impact themselves and their property, nor do they identify any negative impacts of disfellowshipping. On the other hand, they consider cooperativism as important.

This contradiction may be explained, in part, because farmers, in addition to cooperatives, also have the possibility to make purchases or trade their production with private companies. For this reason, although they consider cooperative bonds to be important, they do not judge them as irreplaceable. The contradiction is also explained by the misinformation of associated farmers about what cooperativism is (Bertolin et al., 2008) and the importance that associate/cooperator farmers have in supporting cooperatives (Boesche, 2005; Serigati and Azevedo, 2013).

#### 4.3. Differences between private and cooperative companies: the perception of cooperator family farmers

This section discusses how the cooperator family farmers analyze the differences between private and cooperative companies. 55% of the associate/cooperator farmers sampled consider cooperatives as similar or equal to private companies. This corroborates with other researches that show that 54% of the cooperative members make little distinction between a cooperative enterprise and a commercial enterprise (Oliveira, 2007). It resembles the case of cooperative banks, where clients do not perceive differences in how social responsibility is managed by cooperative or commercial banks, while business logic dominates the most central aspects. Stakeholders engagement is related to consensus building, while dialogic engagement based on a pluralist understanding is only partially considered and then neglected, demonstrating that cooperative strategy for the future must include strengthening its social capital (Aramburu and Pescador, 2017).

These differences between cooperatives and private companies should be more noticeable for cooperator family farmers, since they are significant, especially with regard to principles, purposes, values and mission. The mercantile company works for greater profitability, while the cooperative seeks to meet the needs and wellbeing of the community (Ferreira and Arbage, 2016).

This is partially explained by the fact that many organizations enter into the cooperative system as cooperatives and then act as market entities, which harms the system. In order to succeed, cooperatives should not act as competitors or use the same means as private companies (Nascimento, 2000). What gives them legitimacy is the practice of cooperative principles (Drumond, 2010).

In China, for example, we see state-led programs that have implemented policies to support a new model that unifies family farms and cooperatives. The new model benefits agricultural production, increasing farmers' participation and income (Shen and Shen, 2018). However, in case studies Shen and Shen (2018) have observed that in practice it is a pseudo-dualistic model, as the cooperative functions as a private enterprise controlled by former village officials instead of a voluntary association of farmers for mutual benefit.

Therefore, for cooperatives to remain in the market, they must act within an economic environment fostered by competitiveness (Breitenbach et al., 2017). This makes relations more complex, since there is a fine line between corporation versus competition, collective versus individual interests, management versus ownership. The future of the cooperative depends on the active participation of the member and on the understanding that their interests are being served collectively rather than individually (Breitenbach et al., 2017). An example of this is that the greater the effectiveness of the Fiscal Council of a cooperative,



the greater the loyalty of the associate/cooperator tends to be, demonstrating the importance of consistently acting according to collective interests (Ferreira and Arbage, 2016).

Concerning the perception of market competition between a private company and a cooperative, 95.9% of associate/cooperator family farmers who answered the questionnaire reported that a cooperative could easily compete with a private company. It cannot be said that the cooperative model is less efficient than capital companies, since results from previous studies are still very contradictory and limited in nature (Ferreira and Braga, 2007). In the dairy industry, for example, cooperatives were more efficient in scale and less efficient in production (Ferreira and Braga, 2007).

#### 4.4. Cooperative principles in cooperator-cooperative relationship

Cooperative principles are aspects that should guide the actions of both cooperatives and members. To this end, members and cooperatives must be aware of these principles and frequently assess their compliance. However, 82.4% of the surveyed farmers are not aware of all cooperativism principles. Table 4 confronts theoretical factors related to cooperative principles, defined according to the perception of sampled farmers. They were asked to establish which cooperative principles are fulfilled in order of importance. Associate/cooperator farmers point out that the cooperative principles that are effectively fulfilled are related to economic gains.

The aspects based on social relations, training of members and the construction of a critical vision, as well as the principle of cooperation itself, did not appear among the most fulfilled by the cooperatives. These results allow inferring that farmers construct a cooperative ideal based on their experiences rather than through formal knowledge.

As the order shows, farmers highlighted actions related to financial gains, marketing facilitators and the search for increased profitability. On the other hand, there was less agreement for resistance to capitalism, work and planning together, as well as the search for new ways of thinking and acting together.

If we use this result as an indicative of the cooperative's position in a postmodern scenario, we would have a pessimistic setting for cooperative principles. That is, associate/cooperator farmers and cooperatives seem to ignore or not meet the real objectives of cooperativism. Instead they seek only economic benefits and forget that these organizations excel in collaborative actions and social development. A cooperative should be the sum of shared individual interests; it should start from the economic organization of the cooperative and the results sought would be economic and social gains (quality of life) (Boesche, 2005).

Cooperatives generally have differentials (products, services and technical assistance) that provide a long-term relationship with members, seeking to reduce uncertainties and maintain the frequency of transactions. However, producers point to price as a *sine qua non* factor in the negotiations, showing opportunistic behavior. That is, all the 'differentials' in terms of relationship established with the suppliers,

members of the cooperative, are not strong enough to stand out in relation to the competitive price attribute. If the cooperative has a less attractive price, members tend to migrate to commercial transactions with private firms (Breitenbach et al., 2017). This is because cooperatives do not have "immediate benefits", which is fundamental in the face of an increasing amount of immediate cooperatives (Ferreira and Arbage, 2016).

This scenario presents a dilemma for the century is the duality of challenges for the cooperative future: (a) the growing awareness of business ethics may be the starting point for cooperative societies to return to prominence (Kitson, 1996); (b) the total loss of this differentiated purpose, which gave the movement the will to grow and prosper (Davis and Worthington, 1993).

Without associate/cooperator loyalty, the cooperatives lose their sense of existence and lose in operational efficiency and scale. Consequently, benefits supply to members and their fidelity are shortened. Therefore, a vicious circle is established and it can ultimately lead to the extinction of the cooperative organization (Ferreira and Arbage, 2016).

#### 4.5. Information asymmetry in cooperator-cooperative relationships

Knowledge regarding cooperatives and their decision-making processes was also researched. Most farmers lack information concerning cooperative operations: 80.3% are unaware of the decisions that are made by management; 77.9% ignore who the heads of departments/coordination are; 76.6% are not informed about what happens (actions taken and their reasons). Furthermore, about 70% trusts in the administration, in compliance with cooperative principles, and feels part of the cooperative, as well as they are able to claim and intervene in cooperative actions.

Associate/cooperator farmers have rights, duties and obligations as the cooperative. Its understanding/exercise is fundamental for the proper functioning of the cooperative (Brasil, 1971a, 1971b). However, the research pointed to the low appropriation on behalf of farmers regarding managerial processes in cooperatives. This information is usually shared at meetings, and it is members' duty to assist and participate. Associate/cooperator' ignorance regarding their cooperatives is, therefore, justified by their own failure to attend meetings and assemblies.

It should be noted that internal and external asymmetries exist in organizations, involving managers and associates. This has negative consequences on members' trust in transacting with cooperatives (Bertolin et al., 2008). Such trust is associated with a relationship based on members' dependence with regard to resource provision and information, rather than identifying them with the organization. Consequently, cooperatives are more vulnerable to associate behavior. This is aggravated by the asymmetry of information present in the organizational environment, which tends to encourage agents' individualistic behavior. It also causes the loss of confidence of the associates in the leaders and loss of transactions with members, given the haste to obtain this information and the ease to acquire it with other cooperatives and/or other companies competing in the organization (Bertolin et al., 2008).

In order to overcome these challenges, member participation in the decision-making processes and other actions is important in order to provide a participative management, which is coherent with the cooperative perspective (Brandão et al., 2016). However, in practice, associate logic is reversed: the greater the membership and economic success, the less members will participate. Participation is reduced when: (1) member vote, in proportion to the total number of voters, becomes less valuable in large cooperatives, (2) traveling is required in order to attend assemblies in other cities, which means "abandoning" a production day (Bialoskorski Neto, 2007).

One way to increase participation and commitment is to invest in member training, since cooperative education is related to greater social participation. Agreeing cooperative education is fundamental, for it trains and empowers cooperatives and collaborators, and the idea of

**Table 4**

Factors related to the principles of cooperativism present in cooperatives according associate/cooperator family farmers in Rio Grande do Sul (%).

Factors related to the principles of cooperativism	Presence in the cooperative (%)
Favorable financial results at the end of the year	69.26
Decrease products and services costs	56.56
Increased profitability for associate/cooperator	45.49
Provide dignified living for associate/cooperator	42.21
Assist in local community development	25.82
Facilitate good investments	23.36
Facilitate marketing of agricultural products	20.08
Contribute with a new way of thinking about work	7.38
Team work among associate/cooperator	5.74
Planning among associate/cooperator	2.87
Resisting capitalism	1.23

cooperativism strengthens. This allows associate/cooperator, collaborators and cooperatives to grow together (Silva et al., 2014). According to the federal legislation, cooperatives are required to set up a Technical, Educational and Social Assistance fund to provide assistance to members, their families and, when provided for in the bylaws, to employees, consisting of 5% (five percent), at least, of the net leftovers obtained during exercise (BRASIL, 1971a, 1971b).

On the contrary, in the present research the results showed that there is a lack of efficiency in the use of resources, since 52% of farmers agree that the cooperatives are not concerned with the training of all associate/cooperators, and that not there have been major changes in terms of cooperative knowledge. In addition, more than 70% of respondents agree that training and qualification are not reasons to start the cooperative relationship. Contradictorily, 95% of associate/cooperator recognize that cooperatives promote courses, lectures and events; 75% say that if they did not cooperate, they would miss opportunities to learn.

These results seem contradictory, but they reinforce the educational objective of the cooperatives. At the same time, they demonstrate that training should be further developed and accessible to all associated farmers.

#### 4.6. Summary of the results

As a way to summarize the main results of the research, this section presents a systematization, exhibited in [Frame 02](#). Next, the main findings of the work and how they can contribute to the academic community are discussed.

This research brings innovative results by identifying behavioral and satisfaction aspects of farmers associated with cooperatives. Cooperation is based on solidary parameters only in the initial period of cooperative organizations. Later on, cooperation success occurs only if the economic benefit that the associate seeks is greater than the economic benefit that he/she could locate autonomously, individually or in the free market. This corroborates the findings reported by Eschenburg (1983).

Participation can be influenced by participation costs, which are different for each associate member. The initial cost is the possibility of losing part of their determination and individual economic autonomy to the detriment of the cooperative group. In addition, opportunity costs of the time spent in the participation action is also noted: less participation occurs when the benefits of daily work on rural properties are greater than the economic importance of the decisions to be taken at cooperative assemblies (Bialoskorski Neto, 2007).

As a suggestion to overcome problems, practices designed to meet the different needs of the community or society may be applied, considering that they may influence the reputation perception of the cooperative, improving loyalty (Aramburu and Pescador, 2017) and stakeholder engagement in the search for consensus. A dialogical engagement is recommended, where opinions are not only partially considered and then neglected, making the associated farmers feel like a part of the cooperative process (Passetti et al., 2017). Finally, democracy and market competitiveness are noted as compatible, as demonstrated in the case of the greatest cooperative success, represented by the Mondragon Cooperative Corporation (Forcadell, 2005).

#### 5. Conclusions

Family Farmers in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, perceive the advantages of cooperativism as related to financial return. Associate/cooperator family farmers understand that cooperatives can provide more financial than social benefits. Furthermore, they hold the stereotype that cooperatives resemble private mercantile companies and, therefore, consider the cooperative bond as possibly dispensable.

In managerial terms, this imposes an immediate reconsideration of the role of cooperatives in the contemporary world, since associate/cooperator family farmers build cooperative models based on financial

#### Frame 02

Systematization of the main research results.

Characteristics	Indicator	Main results
Associate/cooperator characteristics	Gender inequality	88% of associates/cooperators are men
	Presence of loyalty	60.66% maintain a relationship only with an agricultural cooperative
	Old age	54% is over 51
	Low education	60% have only basic education level
Associate/cooperator motivations and satisfaction	Reasons for starting a cooperative relationship	Frequency > 90%: easy marketing; access to financial advantages, buying products at lower prices; accessing payment benefits when purchasing.
	Satisfaction with cooperative performance:	Medium or high to 86%;
	Positive impacts of the cooperative relationship for the farmer	Low or medium positive impact for 95.5%
	Importance of cooperativism	Medium or high to 87.7%
Difference between private companies and cooperatives in farmer perceptions	None or little difference	55% of associates/cooperators consider cooperatives similar or equal to private companies
Knowledge of cooperative principles	Ignorance of the principles	82.4% of associates/cooperators do not know all the principles
Information asymmetry in the cooperator-cooperative relationship	Distance between management of cooperatives and farmers	77.9% of associates/cooperators are unaware of who is part of the management of the cooperative
	Little access to information	76.6% of the cooperators are not informed about decisions made by the cooperative and the reasons
	Existing trust	70% of associates/cooperators trust the management of the cooperative
	Scarce training	52% of cooperators think that cooperatives do not provide adequate training and capacity building

interests and not on doctrine. Moreover, associate/cooperator family farmers lack information regarding the cooperatives to which they belong. This may be widely explained by their “self-imposed” absences in meetings and assemblies.

In addition, associate/cooperator fail to recognize social actions as equally important as those aimed at economic improvement, which ultimately guide cooperative actions. In academic terms, it can be said that if these results predicted the behavior of associate/cooperator’s position in a postmodern situation, the scenario for cooperativism would be pessimistic, because cooperativism is deviant from its basic principles and objectives and has focused primarily on actions for economic and financial purposes to the detriment of social actions. In this sense, the results of this research bring contributions to a study area that still lacks primary data.

Finally, it is emphasized that the present research exhibits some limitations, especially concerning the adoption of only descriptive data analysis methods and the scarcity of theoretical references on agricultural business cooperativism available in international journals. Future studies should apply more robust statistical analysis methods, to better validate the obtained results.



## Declarations of interest

None.

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