

# HOW DO PLATFORM CO-OPS WORK?

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## LESSONS FROM ARGENTINA

*A Report by*

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The Institute for the Cooperative Digital Economy (ICDE) is the research division of the Platform Cooperativism Consortium. Established in 2019, its research covers the emerging cooperative digital economy, which is a relatively unexplored domain in fields like anthropology, political science, sociology, history, law, and economics. The cooperative digital economy is rapidly expanding and is closely linked to labor and cooperative studies. The ICDE's work also focuses on finance, entrepreneurship, and organizational studies in business schools, as well as governance and corporate structure, which are critical subjects in law schools.

At the ICDE, we recognize that scholars, technologists, artists, community organizers, and cooperators equally contribute valuable insights to the development of a more just and equitable digital economy. Therefore, the Institute's mission is to provide applied and theoretical knowledge, education, and policy analysis to bridge the research gaps in the emerging cooperative digital economy. Learn more at <https://platform.coop>

1.

# INTRODUCTION

This report<sup>1</sup> addresses the implementation of CoopCycle in Argentina. The platform cooperative CoopCycle was founded in France in 2017 and has since expanded to include 11 more countries, predominantly in Western Europe. This platform co-op is an open-source digital infrastructure for cycling logistics as well as a federation made up of the bike delivery cooperatives that use the platform. The availability of delivery software for federated worker cooperatives signals a watershed in the development of a platform cooperativism ecosystem for a variety of reasons. CoopCycle reduces the costs of technology for cooperatives. It differs from non-cooperative platforms due to its federated structure and Coopyleft peer-production license. For instance, worker cooperatives in the federation vote democratically to determine the amount and allocation of their contribution toward maintaining the platform.

In 2020, the Federación Argentina de Cooperativas de Trabajo de Tecnología, Innovación y Conocimiento [Argentinian Federation of Technology, Innovation and Knowledge Worker Cooperatives] (FACTTIC), an organization comprised of 30 tech worker cooperatives, began the local implementation of this platform co-op. In previous research, I investigated the positive factors, challenges, and limitations of CoopCycle's implementation in Argentina and, thus, the feasibility for this platform to scale and enlarge spaces of social empowerment beyond Western Europe.<sup>2</sup>

This research proposes to delve deeper into the analysis of this platform cooperative as a pathway of social empowerment in the economy. The report thus addresses three distinct objectives. To begin, it documents the advancement of the Argentine implementation over the last year (2022) by identifying obstacles and challenges in a specific municipality in the country. Second, it describes the economic and political benefits worker cooperatives of CoopCycle at a pilot stage in Argentina bring to couriers. I call this dimension the 'cooperative worker advantage.' While the term 'cooperative advantage' is commonly used to describe the value added to businesses by the cooperative model of ownership,<sup>3</sup> I prefer the term 'cooperative worker advantage' to highlight the benefits this model of ownership gives to workers.<sup>4</sup>

Third, it examines this first year of CoopCycle Latinoamérica, which was established in December 2021, as well as the transition of the CoopCycle federation into a multi-stakeholder cooperative, with a focus on the form of inclusion of experiences from outside Europe. Each objective is deployed at different levels: the first in the municipality of San Martín, the

second in Argentina, and the third in the Latin American region. These three objectives will be addressed after outlining the study's background, research question, and methodological keys, as well as describing the main characteristics and timeline of CoopCycle.

## **Background and Research Question**

Labor platforms are digital infrastructures that organize the process of connecting consumers, clients, or suppliers with workers via the cloud. Platform work refers to completing a task or providing a service, either virtually or locally, through these infrastructures, which include forms of evaluating and paying workers.<sup>5</sup> Although there are various kinds of platforms, defined as digital infrastructures that enable different groups of users to interact,<sup>6</sup> labor platforms, such as ride-hailing and food delivery apps, have received most of the attention. While these platforms create job opportunities, they also undermine labor rights: workers are precariously incorporated as microentrepreneurs, independent contractors, or freelancers on these platforms.<sup>7</sup>

In view of this situation, activists, scholars, and workers all around the world have been proposing alternative projects for platforms that, in various ways, incorporate the cooperative model or principles. These projects exist alongside other kinds of collective organization building, such as unionism and new forms of collective representation.<sup>8</sup> 'Platform Socialism'<sup>9</sup> advocates for social ownership of digital assets and new forms of participatory and decentralized governance that prioritize human freedom and equal benefit distribution. Open cooperativism<sup>10</sup> combines cooperativism with the basic principles of common-based peer production in the digital realm. The movement of platform cooperativism calls for cloning the technological heart of platform companies while setting up democratic ownership and governance structures that reduce inequalities and insecurity at work, combat control and data exploitation, and distribute benefits among local communities.<sup>11</sup> The cooperative model has the potential to transform digital platforms into convivial tools that enhance self-determination and respect the rhythm of human life.<sup>12</sup>

Worker cooperatives are one of the more disruptive forms of capitalist production since workers own the means of production they use. These organizations are described as institutional innovations that expand social power, understood as the "power rooted in the capacity to mobilize people for cooperative, voluntary collective actions".<sup>13</sup> As a result, worker cooperatives are seen as one of the pathways to more far-reaching

systemic changes that allow social power to regulate production.<sup>14</sup> Hence, the expansion of CoopCycle may amplify socially empowering structures and practices, cumulatively eroding capitalist power relations<sup>15</sup> and boosting economic imaginaries.<sup>16</sup>

The scaling up of cooperatives and its dilemmas related to cooperative identity, democratic governance, and economic viability, among other concerns, have been thoroughly studied.<sup>17</sup> In circumstances where scale means geographic expansion, these quandaries can be exacerbated by contrasts and inequalities between the community of origin and the other territories. Two forms of geographic expansion can be identified: international multi-localization strategies, and federated approaches.<sup>18</sup>

The first strategy is embodied by Mondragón, one of the world's most iconic cooperative experiences, which originated in the Basque Country. With the goal of improving employment and competitiveness in Basque parent cooperatives, it has increased non-cooperator employment overseas since the 1990s, notably in Brazil, China, India, Mexico, Poland, and the Czech Republic.<sup>19</sup> The second approach is based on the International Cooperative Alliance (ICA)'s principle of cooperation among cooperatives, and consists of scaling through federating and coordinating, or through networked strategies.<sup>20</sup> As a result, while the former may scale businesses, the latter may also get to expand organizational and economic democracy beyond the communities of origin.

Reflecting on this issue becomes more urgent yet promising when it comes to platform cooperatives: due to network effects,<sup>21</sup> platforms need to grow to be sustainable, and the software component makes them appear not only necessarily but also easily scalable. However, the capacity of platform cooperatives to scale is not automatic: it is not exclusively dependent on software availability. Legal frameworks, public policies, organizational cultures, local identities, and various types of resources must be examined when assessing feasibility in different contexts and territories.<sup>22</sup> So, how impactful can social change be? Should scale and internationalization be approached in terms of dissemination (one-way direction) and replicability, or circulation (multi-directional movement) and adaptability instead?

From a socio-technical standpoint, it is recognized that technologies are capable of operating in a variety of settings through processes of functioning construction that re-signify such technologies.<sup>23</sup> According to a transnational perspective informed by subaltern studies and postcolonial

theory, this means that processes and transformations do not follow a one-way direction from a supposedly homogeneous European center to the rest of the world.<sup>24</sup> Instead, they are grasped through analyses of exchanges, collaborations, and reciprocal influences under circulation patterns rather than dissemination patterns.<sup>25</sup> This implies that ideas and practices are reformulated from one context to another, and that the context of circulation, implementation, and appropriation is more important than the origin of a given practice.

This lens invites us to consider the geographic scale of cooperatives as a process of expansion by territorialization, which means two things. First, the conditions for the operation of platform co-ops in different territories do not transform these experiences into copies of the original or exceptions from the standard. Second, a transnational platform co-op is thus made up of the links and influences that exist between experiences in diverse territories. In a nutshell, CoopCycle might be French in its birth, but it is also German, Mexican, Argentine, and so on, at the same time.



2.

# METHODOLOGY



The methodology strategy is based on a single qualitative case study<sup>26</sup> of CoopCycle, which has been conducted since 2021. On the one hand, the case study is of an instrumental nature in that its analysis allows for conclusions on broader topics in the field of platform cooperativism, such as the scale and geographic expansion of cooperatives, social empowerment, and inter-cooperation. CoopCycle, on the other hand, has two notable features that make the case particularly compelling. On a local level, it is Argentina's most advanced platform cooperativism process in the digital labor domains. On a global level, it is one of the few cases of platform cooperativism with open-source software, which enables for more democratic and egalitarian conditions to be assumed. As a result, the case has intrinsic interest and may serve as a beacon for future experiences.

The primary research techniques resorted to were participant observation, semi-structured interviews, documentary analysis, and desk research. These techniques were complemented by participatory dynamics with the FACTTIC team, such as internal workshops and joint public presentations, aimed at providing feedback on both the research process and the implementation of CoopCycle. These exchanges, as well as the interviews utilized in this report, were part of a linkage project carried out by FACTTIC and the Gino Germani Research Institute (University of Buenos Aires) in 2022.<sup>27</sup> Through the implementation of CoopCycle in Argentina, this project aims to contribute to local development, labor formalization, and socioeconomic inclusion, with a particular focus on the municipality of San Martín, a district with a surface area of 56 km<sup>2</sup> located in the north area of the Buenos Aires conurbation and composed of 27 localities.

In my 2021 ICDE report, I identified the following dimensions as contributing to the feasibility – and at the same time posing challenges and limitations – of CoopCycle in Argentina: i) the starting point; ii) the context conditions regarding the cooperative legal framework; iii) the characteristics of cooperativism in Argentina; iv) urbanization, infrastructural context and bike delivery; v) the role of the State; vi) organizational resources; vii) participation in networks and building of a platform cooperativism ecosystem; and viii) courier cooperatives' incubation and accompanying model.<sup>28</sup> While many aspects remained essentially unchanged during 2022 (particularly, i-vi), the development of a platform cooperativism ecosystem (vii) centered on CoopCycle to enhance courier cooperatives (viii) has seen changes. Therefore, this report documents the advancement of the local implementation over the last year, outlining obstacles and challenges in the development of an

ecosystem around CoopCycle in San Martín, within the framework of the aforementioned linkage project. In addition to participant observation, seven key actors in the municipality were interviewed for this purpose.

To describe the cooperative worker advantage, I analyzed the two worker cooperatives using CoopCycle at the pilot stage in Argentina. A cooperative is simultaneously a collectively run company and an association of people.<sup>29</sup> Thus, reflecting on its benefits or degrees of success necessitates considering at least two dimensions: the labor-economic and the associative dimensions.<sup>30</sup> The cooperatives were primarily addressed through semi-structured interviews and secondarily with documentary analysis and desk research. The following aspects will be described: i) worker ownership; ii) wages; iii) work management; iv) governance; and v) other kinds of benefits, such as access to social security, insurance, and training.

To document the first year of CoopCycle Latinoamérica and the transition of the CoopCycle federation towards a multi-stakeholder cooperative, I resorted to documentary analysis, desk research, observant participation in CoopCycle Latinoamérica gatherings, and informal exchanges with CoopCycle members in Europe. The following dimensions will be prioritized: i) collaborations between CoopCycle Latinoamérica members; and ii) forms of including experiences from outside Europe in CoopCycle's federation or multi-stakeholder cooperative, particularly Latin American experiences.

3.

COOPCYCLE:  
A TRANS-  
NATIONAL,  
INTER-  
COOPERATIVE,  
AND DIVERSE  
PLATFORM

CoopCycle was founded as a non-profit association in 2017 by a group of activists in France. Among them was a single individual who provided software development. The platform makes use of software that allows courier cooperatives to manage their deliveries and provide the service to restaurants, shops, and different clients. The open-source software has a Copyleft license,<sup>31</sup> so regardless of who created it, anyone can execute, use, and modify it. That said, CoopCycle adds a twist to this type of license: it claims that the software has a Coopyleft license, which guarantees its use by worker collectives exclusively. This experience merges cooperative tradition, digital commons, and environmental transition models.<sup>32</sup>

To ensure democracy, the founder association established the federation of couriers' cooperatives in Europe. By the end of 2022, CoopCycle's webpage listed roughly 70 couriers' collectives as members, the vast majority of which are in Western Europe. These collectives may not necessarily be organized from the beginning under cooperative legal structures: CoopCycle welcomes bike delivery collectives that embrace the values and principles of social and fair economy and commit to forming a cooperative within two years after signing the collaboration agreement with the federation.<sup>33</sup>

CoopCycle's mission is "to foster solidarity between coops, to reduce their costs thanks to services pooling and to create a common force to advocate courier's rights".<sup>34</sup> Even though its founders were not couriers, CoopCycle's software was shaped from the start by the contributions and feedback of courier collectives. When certain delivery platforms went bankrupt or deteriorated labor conditions in 2016, these collectives began to contact the founder group.<sup>35</sup> CoopCycle is thus a platform cooperative aimed at improving the wellbeing of couriers, but it is promoted by an activist tech actor. In this regard, despite the fact that this is a worker-centered experience intended to enhance platform labor, the federation is a step towards forming a multi-stakeholder cooperative<sup>36</sup> that would include other types of users and their needs.

As software, CoopCycle allows for the management of the entire supply, purchase and delivery cycle for food and other products. It supports three business models: food delivery or foodtech, the traditional courier services, and the last mile service for products purchased online.<sup>37</sup> Worker cooperatives can set up fees, assign, manage and track tasks, manage restaurants and menus, link to external e-commerce software, and have their payment secured using the Stripe payment gateway. It also includes apps for restaurants and shops, couriers, and consumers.

Besides being open source, the software has four notable features: i) it does not collect data; ii) it prioritizes the use of open technologies (e.g., OpenStreetMap for georeferencing); iii) each cooperative has its own server instance to manage autonomously; and iv) there is no algorithmic management of work processes or workers' performance. The software does not assess and rate workers, nor does it deploy gamification strategies. A human dispatcher assigns deliveries to couriers; workers can be geo-tracked by cooperatives but not by customers; and no features allow customers to evaluate workers.<sup>38</sup>

The digital infrastructure, however, is not the only shared asset. CoopCycle provides a well-known brand. The cooperatives in the federation also mutualize communication, commercial offerings, funding, insurance, and training, among other things. Unlike venture capital funding on corporate platforms, these services are supported by annual contributions from its members and, to a lesser extent, contributions from restaurants and shops, public subventions and grants, in-kind services, the CoopCycle association, and volunteer work.<sup>39</sup>

As for the organization of the federation, CoopCycle has carried out annual general assemblies in Europe since 2018. Furthermore, the federation has been resorting to digital tools to channel collective decision-making and facilitate exchanges among worker collectives and project participants. Loomio also supports debates and remote voting in addition to the assemblies. Via Slack, courier collectives throughout the world, tech workers, and founder members deliberate on ownership models, legal issues, bugs in the software, and new features.

In 2019, the non-profit association began professionalizing CoopCycle's structure and a governance transition,<sup>40</sup> which were formalized in 2020 and 2021, respectively. As for the professionalization process, 2020 was a year of great growth: the pandemic and the isolation measures boosted delivery and logistics economic activities. CoopCycle expanded to three new countries out of a total of seven, had 40 new collectives join the federation, and achieved over 3.5 million€ in cumulative turnover. This growth called for more resources, and thus the first two employees of the CoopCycle federation were recruited for IT development, sales, and coordination.<sup>41</sup>

That was also the year FACTTIC began the implementation in Argentina<sup>42</sup> thanks to a state grant that enabled the development of the necessary software adaptations for localization (i.e., changing the gateway for

payments and setting local taxes). Later that year, the federation received a second state grant to accompany and strengthen courier cooperatives in their use of the platform. Mexico began its own localization process in 2020 as well. Promoted by an international multilateral alliance, the localization was formalized in 2021, when México launched a pilot initiative called “Rodando juntas” (Rolling Together).<sup>43</sup> Argentina and Mexico have been exchanging learnings and experiences since then, as well as collaborating on the development of new features for the platform.

It is important to note that, during the pilot stage of the experiences, this exchange is entirely based on reciprocity: neither the Mexican nor the Argentine courier cooperatives have yet made the annual contribution. In exchange, during 2021, a developer from Mexico — funded by a non-governmental organization headquartered in that country — and another from Argentina — funded by an Argentine State grant — contributed to the software’s development, in addition to working on each localization process.

Concerning the governance model, CoopCycle began to shift from an association-centered to a federation-centered organization, and in 2021, the courier collectives in Europe chose their first board, according to the principle one coop = one vote.<sup>44</sup> The board is made up of ten persons from six countries, largely from delivery cooperatives: two finance directors, two software directors, two onboarding directors, one director of rules and regulations, the president of the board of directors, a coordinator representing the federation’s employees, and a volunteer association member with advisory duties. Members of the federation say that the platform’s everyday operation is now in the hands of couriers rather than volunteers (Field-notes, November 2022). As previously stated, the federation serves as a predecessor to a multi-stakeholder cooperative, which in France would be officially known as a SCIC (Société Coopérative d’Intérêt Collectif).

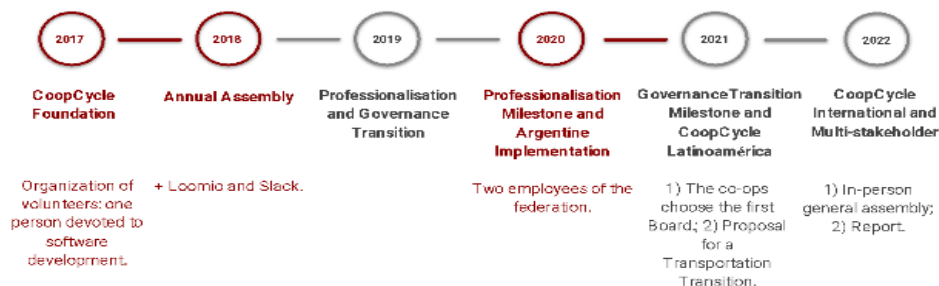


Figure 1. Timeline of CoopCycle. Note: Prepared by the author based on desk research and key informants.

As the project moved forward in Argentina, FACTTIC maintained contact with the European founder group, which gave assistance and guidance. However, the Argentine project's formal admission into the CoopCycle network did not occur until mid-2021. Many delivery workers in Argentina use motorbikes, while CoopCycle in Europe is committed to bike delivery as a means of reducing pollution. To overcome this potential value collision, FACTTIC prepared a proposal for a three-year transportation transition for Argentine worker cooperatives,<sup>45</sup> which was approved by CoopCycle's federation.

The process of building agreements and designing this alternative opened up questions about CoopCycle's capacity to redefine itself as a social technology for the inclusion of excluded workers. The project could move on while accommodating disputes thanks to the transition strategy. This plan bridges values and practices and makes it possible for Latin America to resignify and use CoopCycle. Shortly afterwards, the Argentine federation of tech worker cooperatives played a key role in the establishment of CoopCycle Latinoamérica in December 2021.<sup>46</sup> This network includes Argentina, Chile, Mexico, and Uruguay, where experiences are at the pilot stage.

Lastly, in September 2022 the federation held an in-person general assembly, which was expected to bring together 20 to 30 cooperatives from eight different countries (Field-notes, July 2022). The event was organized: i) as a constitutive meeting of the international Federation CoopCycle; and ii) to formalize the creation of a SCIC to take over from the CoopCycle association. By the end of 2022, the federation prepared an annual report that systematizes news on software development, onboarding, and board. This is the first report of its kind, and it will be published on a monthly basis. According to this report, CoopCycle foresees a 2023 of growth, which includes fostering greater recognition internationally and attracting new cooperatives.<sup>47</sup>

To summarize, these characterization and timeline support the argument that CoopCycle deploys a federative approach to grow, which delineates a transnational, inter-cooperative, and diverse platform.<sup>48</sup> The open-source software triggered implementations outside of Europe, resulting in the launch of CoopCycle Latinoamérica. This transnationalization of CoopCycle's ecosystem was aided by inter-cooperative collaboration, as evidenced by the growth of the development team with the onboarding of Argentina and Mexico and the enhanced capacity to advance with new software features. Finally, the resignification of the project's identity according to the different territories allowed for a reframe of CoopCycle's ecological agenda and the possibility of integrating diverse experiences and paths towards (environmental) sustainability.



4.

BUILDING AN  
ECOSYSTEM  
FOR  
COOPCYCLE

## **Building an Ecosystem for CoopCycle<sup>49</sup>**

One of the Argentine team's takeaways from the 2020-2021 experience was that it was vital to generate positive contexts for courier collectives that would use CoopCycle in order for them to flourish. This could be addressed by shifting from a model of incubating and accompanying couriers to one that strengthens a cooperative platform ecosystem.<sup>50</sup> Building ecosystems can refer to putting the principle of cooperation among cooperatives into action<sup>51</sup> as well as organizing structures that facilitate more coordinated, horizontal, and stable exchanges between actors – not necessarily cooperatives – interested in mutually supporting each other.<sup>52</sup> From this new approach emerged the idea of creating ecosystems focused on specific territories where CoopCycle may be deployed in accordance with social needs and communities' expectations.

By interviewing and connecting chambers, guilds, cooperatives, social and solidarity organizations, suppliers, local governments, delivery workers, practitioners in the field of IT, universities, financial institutions, and other actors interested in promoting CoopCycle, the team's goal was to analyze and communicate the benefits that the introduction of CoopCycle could provide to the different actors involved in the territorial socio-economic circuit,<sup>53</sup> as well as contribute to creating the necessary conditions for CoopCycle to operate there. In particular, this strategy was applied in San Martín during 2022 because it is renowned as a municipality with a track record of implementing positive policies for the social and solidarity economy.

First, an actor mapping was conducted in San Martín, and key actors were identified for further engagement. The mapping revealed that all the necessary participants in the delivery socio-economic circuit exist in the territory and that some of them have a long trajectory. To contact those actors, two strategies were carried out. On the one hand, the team met with organizations, chambers, universities, cooperative financial institutions, and state bodies to present the project. On the other hand, one semi-structured interview was held with a former municipal government official, and six semi-structured interviews were conducted with potential stakeholders located in the territory: a gastronomic chamber (two interviews), a delivery worker cooperative, a couriers' guild that promotes organizing in worker cooperatives, a social and solidarity food distribution network, and a cooperative bank. The interviews sought to explore their experience and perspectives on traditional delivery platforms as well as their assessments of the potentialities and limitations

of CoopCycle's project in that particular district. Moreover, the local team advanced in a communication strategy, producing the Argentine landing page,<sup>54</sup> as well as designing a brand identity handbook and a style handbook applicable to all Latin American experiences besides San Martín's.

The phase of engagement and interviews revealed that CoopCycle might be advantageous to everyone in at least three ways: 1) reaching out to new clients; 2) improving logistics and work processes; and 3) reclaiming a portion of the fee that established platforms operating in the local market keep. Additionally, participating in the Argentine implementation of a cooperative delivery platform would enable them to increase their visibility as innovation agents in their territory.

However, a number of roadblocks were identified. First, while most of the actors expressed an interest in participating in an ongoing process, they did not position themselves as champions of it. The idea of an ecosystem connotes horizontality, which complicates the identification of coordinating functions even further. Starting the virtuous cycle of platform cooperatives is thus a difficult endeavor. Local governments play a critical role in overcoming this barrier.<sup>55</sup> In addition to public procurement, creating incentives to shift demand in favor of these circuits is one of the first steps in strengthening socio-economic circuits.

Furthermore, the sustainability of socio-economic circuits also relies on expanding and improving the economic and technological conditions, as well as the relational and institutional capacities of the actors who comprise them.<sup>56</sup> To that end, the findings showed much distrust on platforms. This second obstacle constitutes a significant barrier to strengthening relational capacities. Most of the actors, particularly those who have utilized or are now using corporate platforms in their businesses, report bad experiences. In addition, suspicion arises as a result of the difficulty in understanding the differences in governance and ownership between CoopCycle and other platforms. It is worth noting that this distrust might also be connected to the distance from the project's origins in France. Because multiple stakeholders may have divergent interests, barriers to synergy may be reinforced. Although CoopCycle is a tool designed to benefit couriers, it also aspires to include and benefit other actors. In this regard, while couriers and restaurants are expected to collaborate in the use of the platform, their long-standing divergent interests should not be overlooked.

Finally, the delivery sector is a deeply unstable, precarious, and low-income sector. Delivery is not taken as a permanent job or trade among couriers. Sometimes it is combined with other jobs, resulting in different workdays among cooperatives' couriers. Hence, the cooperative may not be the primary source of income for workers. All these factors pose great challenges for platform cooperatives to thrive in the delivery industry. Among them are raising capital when workers' incomes are low and organizing collective decision-making among heterogeneous couriers with varying workdays.<sup>57</sup> Following, the report delves into the benefits that the cooperative model brings to the two pilot experiences of CoopCycle in Argentina.

5.

# COOPERATIVE WORKER ADVANTAGE

With a view to highlighting the benefits of the cooperative model for workers, it is necessary to contextualize the geopolitics of platform labor: The informal economy and labor precarity are longstanding issues in the majority world.<sup>58</sup> According to Fairwork's ratings of gig economy platforms<sup>59</sup> in Latin America, half or more of the platforms in Argentina, Chile, Ecuador, Brazil, Ecuador, and Paraguay score a 0 on a scale of 0 to 10. The only exception to this is Colombia, which has better-rated platforms.<sup>60</sup> The cooperative worker advantage of the two couriers' collectives at the pilot stage in the use of CoopCycle in Argentina is thus assessed against this background.

TRU (the acronym for Trabajadores de Reparto Unidos, Courier Workers Unite in English) is a worker-owned cooperative in San Martin that employs 17 workers. Its primary business is food delivery, but it also offers traditional courier services to regular customers. It currently has 50 clients, and the number of monthly deliveries varies, mainly due to fluctuations in the gastronomic sector's economic performance: while in July 2022 the cooperative made over 3000 deliveries, these dropped to roughly 2000 in August. TRU wishes to expand its operations as a food delivery cooperative.

This cooperative was created at the start of the pandemic by couriers of a corporate delivery platform as a means of organizing in response to the platform's poor working conditions. FACTTIC trained workers on the use of CoopCycle in 2021, and the cooperative began as a pilot experience. Because TRU was a new collective, difficulties arose when cooperative formalization and technology incorporation overlapped, and the pilot experience got bogged down. However, thanks to the building ecosystem strategy in San Martin, training was resumed in 2022. Working more thoroughly at the local level allowed FACTTIC to connect with a social movement TRU had recently joined and thus resume the training and pilot use of the platform with a more robust set of supporting actors.

Central is based in the city of Salta, at the northwest of Argentina, and is made up of 15 worker-owners and 5 couriers who are not members of the cooperative. Central was founded in 2017 – formalizing as a worker cooperative in 2019 – and it participates in a national couriers' guild. FACTTIC trained on this pilot experience for the use of CoopCycle in 2022. Its main activity is traditional courier services, which it now provides to around 300 clients with an average of 30 deliveries per day. Although workers also deliver food for restaurants, they have never used corporate delivery platforms. Neither TRU nor Central have experience with last-

mile services. Since this cooperative does not intend to develop food delivery, they plan to start using CoopCycle as a tool for internal work and logistics management. TRU and Central mostly use motorbikes, but both are committed to incorporating more bikes into their operations. FACTTIC recently gave Central a cargo bike as a donation.

Table 1. Main Characteristics of TRU and Central

	TRU	Central
Location	San Martín, Buenos Aires, Argentina.	Salta, northwest Argentina.
Origin	During pandemic.  Facing corporate delivery platform's working conditions.	Pre-pandemic.  No experience with corporate delivery platforms.
Activity	Main: food delivery.  Secondary: traditional courier services.	Main: traditional courier services.  Secondary: food delivery.
Clients and orders	50 clients.  Almost 2000 deliveries in August 2022.	300 clients.  30 deliveries per day.
Worker ownership	17 worker-owners.  A percentage of each delivery is set aside for the cooperative.	15 worker-owners + 5 non-member couriers.  Contribution to the cooperative by worker-owners and couriers.
Wages	Per task.  Lower wages due to lower turnover.  At the beginning corporate platform as complement.	Per task.  All complement with other jobs.
Other benefits	Social scheme 'Boosting Work'.  Social security: 'Social Monotax'.  Occupational accident insurance.  Training to professionalize.  Freedom to choose when to work, except from Friday and Saturday nights.	Social scheme.  Training in cooperative management.  Freedom to choose when to work.

Work management	Supervisors coordinate work and assign tasks.	Supervisors coordinate work and assign tasks.
Governance	Elected Board.  Board meetings.  Regular exchange between members on important issues.	Board election by assembly.  Informal meetings between all members.

Note: Prepared by the author based on desk research and interviews to the cooperatives.

Concerning worker ownership, all TRU workers are owners of the cooperative. Some couriers in Central are not members since membership is regarded as a process that not all couriers are ready or willing to undertake. However, the cooperative views it as a process that will take place eventually. These cooperatives do not generate profits currently. On the contrary, much of their activities are supported by voluntary work from their members. Moreover, as a contribution to the cooperatives, TRU sets aside a percentage of each delivery, and Central gets a weekly contribution from both worker-owners and couriers. In terms of assets, these couriers' co-ops own very slim means of production. Except for the new cargo bike supplied by FACTTIC to Central, motorbikes, bikes, and cell phones are individual assets, meaning they are not property of the cooperatives. TRU has two computers donated by FACTTIC, while Central has computers of its own in addition to the two donated by FACTTIC. The cooperatives do not own the offices where they operate: While Central leases space, TRU has access to a space in a productive pole lent by a social movement affiliated with the solidarity economy.

With respect to wages, both cooperatives compute income based on tasks. Worker In TRU, at the beginning of the experience, workers needed to complement their wages from the cooperative by working for a corporate delivery platform individually, thus labor at the cooperative was not their sole job. Currently, they do not resort to traditional platforms to complement their income but rather to a social scheme. Due to lower turnover than traditional delivery platforms, they do not reach the same income as when working for a corporate platform. Each worker receives an individual subsidy from a social scheme called Potenciar trabajo (Boosting Work)<sup>61</sup> that allows them to work exclusively at the cooperative, as it represents half of the legal minimum wage in Argentina. The cooperative is now debating the minimum number of hours that each individual should give to the cooperative in order to gain access to the social program.



In addition to this subsidy, workers have access to other kinds of benefits not existing in corporate platform work. The Argentine Cooperatives Act no. 20,337 stipulates an associational— non-labor—link between workers and the cooperative. Not being salaried employees, cooperative members are considered self-employed, especially with regards to social security. This generally means less protection and labor rights than salaried workers. As a result, worker co-ops of all kinds in Argentina face the challenge of achieving better social security conditions, and even more so in the case of CoopCycle experiences, which are still in the pilot stage. In terms of social security, TRU pays the Social Monotax, a regime for low taxpayers that covers health-care insurance and pension contributions. They also have occupational accident insurance provided by a cooperative financial entity. Finally, they have been through various sorts of training, such as cooperative management and food manipulation, in order to professionalize the activity. Working conditions at the cooperative offer more freedom: Workers can choose when to work, with the exception of Friday and Saturday nights, which are mandatory for all members by decision of the workers' collective.

All workers in Central supplement their income with other sources and do not devote full workdays to the cooperative. This implies that workers choose when and for how many hours they labor. An interesting finding is that workers at Central also have access to a social scheme provided by the National government. This is critical to keeping the collective project going, as Central is an activist project that resorts to the social scheme to gradually capitalize the cooperative. Regardless of the number of hours worked, if a worker perceives the social scheme, the weekly contribution to the cooperative must be made. Just like TRU, despite the fact that the social scheme is individual, given that social organizations frequently mediate between people and public policies, cooperatives get to collectively set certain criteria for access. Finally, being part of Central provides workers access to cooperative management training.

Regarding work management, in both cooperatives, supervisors coordinate work and assign tasks to couriers, who can choose whether to take the tasks. These supervisors are generally also in charge of the maintenance of premises as well as management and accounting duties. In relation to governance, TRU has an elected board, and assemblies are not held on a regular basis. Instead, they hold board meetings and have regular discussions about key issues with all members. In Central, the board is elected by the assembly, and the cooperative routinely organizes informal meetings between all members.

In sum, these cooperatives enable workers to transform a precarious and lonely job into one that is more stable, protected, shared, and self-managed. This is relevant not just for the economic well-being of workers, but also for the group sense and collective identity that workers affirm to develop as a result of the cooperative. Moreover, the cooperative tool helps them organize a job that, if done individually, implies a significant workload in organization and logistics. Work management and governance practices allow for collective engagement and freedom at work. This freedom does not imply a lack of responsibility for the collective project: Workers contribute a part of their incomes to sustain the cooperatives and commit to a particular number of hours or economic contributions to be part of it. While some benefits in working conditions and social security have been achieved, improving wages and labor rights remains a challenge that cooperative workers recognize and desire to address in the future.

To overcome this situation, it is a priority to reach a critical mass that would ensure sufficient income for couriers, since worker cooperatives currently have lower turnover than corporate delivery platforms. As in Mexico, for small cooperatives with low capital flow, being able to have positive economic results in the short term is critical. Otherwise, their interest in technological adoption may diminish as they focus on more profitable or urgent activities.<sup>62</sup> Also, this must be supplemented by cooperative training, specially designed to support these associated workers who are struggling in a sector dominated by individual labor. Finally, to consolidate these cooperatives' collective identities, it would be desirable to strengthen their links with CoopCycle Latin America, and the CoopCycle federation.

6.

BUILDING  
COOPCYCLE  
LATINOAMÉRICA  
THROUGH  
REGIONAL  
REALIZATION

CoopCycle Latinoamérica was created in December 2021 as an informal network of experiences linked to CoopCycle in Argentina, Chile, Mexico, and Uruguay. Among its participants, there are both courier collectives in their initial stages, and actors interested in implementing CoopCycle and fostering platform coops, such as state bodies, universities, non-governmental organizations, and federations of cooperatives. The objective of the network is to discuss and collectively address shared technical, social, and territorial challenges.

Collaborations among its participants have been numerous. In 2021, FACTTIC set up a new payment gateway that is useful for many countries in the region, and Mexico developed the feature of cash payment. Together, these teams also suggested translations to improve the Spanish on the platform. Although in 2022 the network lost certain momentum, the Argentine and Mexican teams explored the idea of submitting proposals for funding together and collaboratively elaborated a list of shared needs and possible new features to develop in the software. Also, the Mexican team gave access to the round of assessment carried out with the bike delivery worker cooperatives in that country.<sup>63</sup>

Uruguayan experiences attended demos of the platform co-op organized by FACTTIC and started to localize the software with the help of this federation. In Chile, besides the collaboration given by FACTTIC to localize the software, two worker cooperatives attended demos and started training. Currently, one of these worker cooperatives is in the pilot stage. This process was facilitated by a social economy and cooperative university center, that also helped coordinate interviews with the Chilean couriers' cooperatives carried out by the Argentine linkage project's team. More recently, contacts and gatherings have taken place with Brazil, where a social movement, a university, and a couriers' collective are collaborating to assess the possibility of joining CoopCycle and the Latin American network. All these activities assisted in overcoming limitations and recognizing shared needs and challenges. The consolidation of CoopCycle's project at a regional scale is thus a way of functioning construction.

That being said, it is also important to examine how this network is integrated into the organization of CoopCycle in Europe. In other words, which is the form of inclusion of experiences from outside Europe in the platform co-op. This issue gained relevance in the European federation in 2022, being one of the goals of the in-person general assembly held in September to establish CoopCycle International. However, the assembly

remained primarily European. While no one from Argentina was able to come, two workers from couriers' cooperatives in Mexico got to attend the gathering. Additionally, one of the topics of the general assembly of CoopCycle this year was the prospect of forming regional CoopCycle federations, specifically a Basque Country federation.<sup>64</sup> More research and time will thus be required to document the pathway towards CoopCycle International and its structure.

It is worth noting that the link between CoopCycle in Europe and Argentina is through FACTTIC, and Mexico via the non-governmental organization championing the project. These actors serve as a kind of ambassadors or intermediaries between the CoopCycle federation and local courier cooperatives. This raises the risk that these actors may be seen as the platform's owners or managers, posing barriers to couriers' appropriation of CoopCycle.

In addition to the international debate, the in-person assembly was scheduled to address the transition from an association to a multi-stakeholder cooperative. Although the SCIC has not yet been launched, it is intended that when it is ultimately formalized, it will include experiences from outside Europe. Cooperatives will have to meet two prerequisites in order to join with full rights (i.e., voice and vote): achieving labor rights for its workers, and using bikes. There are open debates, and there is also flexibility in how to achieve those aims. Temporary exceptions and transition models will be available to accompany cooperatives and contribute to their participation in the multi-stakeholder cooperative. Throughout this process, the federation will have to remain mindful of diversity and contexts.



7.

# CONCLUSIONS

This report analyzed the implementation of CoopCycle in Argentina as a means of assessing this platform co-op's possibilities to chart a pathway of social empowerment in the economy. The study addressed three complementary and multilevel objectives for this purpose: documenting the progress of the Argentine implementation in a specific municipality; describing the benefits worker cooperatives of CoopCycle at the pilot stage in Argentina provide to couriers; and analyzing CoopCycle Latinoamérica's first year and its form of inclusion in CoopCycle's federation. The research proposes to deal with cooperatives' geographic scale as processes of expansion through territorialization, implying that local experiences are not merely replications or exceptions, and that transnational platform co-ops are composed of multidirectional links and influences between experiences in diverse territories.

The first objective focused on analyzing the strategy of building an ecosystem for CoopCycle in the San Martín district. After concluding that courier cooperatives would benefit from an ecosystem-building approach, the Argentine team worked in 2022 to consolidate a platform delivery socioeconomic circuit in a municipality with a long history of social and solidarity economy. Although the research-action phase demonstrated that CoopCycle may be advantageous to all actors in the circuit, a set of barriers was also identified. First, the difficulties in getting an actor to champion the process rather than simply supporting it. The municipal government may be of critical importance in this regard. Second, the distrust on platforms and divergent interests among participants that jam the synergies required for the development of platform co-ops. Third, the characteristics of the delivery activity.

The second objective delved into the two pilot experiences in Argentina in order to reflect on the benefits that worker cooperatives provide to couriers. While TRU concentrates on food delivery and was formed during the pandemic as a way of counteracting corporate platforms, Central was founded earlier and has greater expertise in traditional courier services. These equally small cooperatives are strategic tools for transforming an individual and precarious activity into a collective and more protected job. TRU and Central show that workers have more freedom at work and increased political participation. Also, that members positively assess the formation of a collective identity in the context of a very individualized job. Some gains have been made in terms of working conditions and social security. Nevertheless, obtaining a critical mass that would increase cooperative turnover remains a priority to secure the reproduction of workers' lives while also maintaining interest in technological adoption.

Furthermore, cooperative training and greater connections with CoopCycle Latin America and the CoopCycle federation may help to strengthen the collective identities of these peculiar workers.

The third objective was centered on CoopCycle Latinoamérica and its process of inclusion in the CoopCycle federation. This regional network has experienced a number of collaborations over the past two years. Although they were not enough to strengthen the organization throughout 2022, they have been able to keep it going, which is a success in and of itself. Since the 2022 in-person general assembly deepened the multi-stakeholder and international project, but did not get to formalize it, the road that CoopCycle International will take is unknown. However, some promising guidelines that would take context and diversity into account when a cooperative joins the international organization have been proposed. The cooperative pathway of social empowerment is still up for debate.





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