

A configurational approach on the strategic relevance of cooperative models of agri-food value chain organization for sustainable transformation

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Abstract

Cooperative models in agri-food value chains are characterized by modes of horizontal and vertical organization among different collective actors, cooperative and investor-owned businesses. The cooperative models can adopt different organizational features at horizontal level (between actors at the same value chain stage) and at vertical level (between value chain stage). These organizational features range from coordination among autonomous collective actors to integration in a centralized operating and decision-making structure. Depending on contractualization and internal governance, these models can present polycentric governance features marked to varying extent. We raise the question whether we may identify archetypes of cooperative models that are more, or less strategically relevant for sustainable transformation, depending on their underlying social-ecological context. This paper informs theoretically a configurational evaluative framework in this regard, with an eye on a future qualitative comparative analysis of use in this epistemological process. Against a backdrop of institutional and social-ecological literature, the paper successively discusses analytical dimensions of differentiation of cooperative models, conditions that can be constitutive of contextualized configurations, and outcomes of strategic relevance. The paper then discusses the underlying premises and limits of this theoretically informed configurational framework. For instance, the paper explores the limits of a value chain meso-level approach anchored in the perceptions of the stakeholders' representatives, reducing complex variables to a set of conditions of value chain configuration.