

## ICA CCR EUROPEAN RESEARCH CONFERENCE 2022

*“Rethinking co-operatives: From local to global and from the past to the future”*

13-15 July 2022, Athens Greece

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**International  
Co-operative Alliance**  
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# **Agricultural cooperatives as transition intermediaries**

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## **Abstract**

Agriculture is facing major challenges related to climate change, loss of biodiversity and food and nutrition security. To mitigate these problems, a societal transition towards more sustainable food systems is needed. Transition processes require changes at multiple levels of society as well as commitment from multiple actors. Literature has indicated that intermediaries are crucial in facilitating sustainability transitions.

While cooperatives are acknowledged as classic intermediaries between individual producers and other food system actors, their role as sustainability transition intermediaries remains understudied. This paper explores the potential of cooperatives to perform the role of transition intermediary in supporting producers in their needs to adopt sustainable production practices. Ten cases of cooperatives in conventional and organic vegetable systems in Uruguay have been studied qualitatively.

Findings show that the classic intermediary roles that cooperatives fulfil in food systems also address most of the needs of producers in the transition to sustainable food systems. By providing organic inputs, organizing access to output markets, sharing knowledge, and facilitating sustainable production practices, cooperatives support producers within and across conventional and organic food systems. Cooperatives mostly function as implicit transition intermediaries, facilitated by their legitimacy among producers, their embeddedness in rural networks, and by refraining from taking a strong normative position. While cooperatives have the potential to be more explicit transition intermediaries, this ambition encounters several organisational limitations. We provide recommendations for cooperatives, but also for policymakers that support cooperatives, to optimize their potential in intermediating the transition towards sustainable food systems.

Keywords: transition, sustainability, intermediary, agriculture, environment