

COOPERATION NETWORKS: THE CONTRASSENSE OF MICRO AND SMALL COMPANIES IN BAHIA OF ATTACHING HIGH IMPORTANCE BUT NOT PARTICIPATING IN THESE NETWORKS

REDES DE COOPERAÇÃO: O CONTRASSENSE DAS MICRO E PEQUENAS EMPRESAS DA BAHIA NA ATRIBUIÇÃO DE IMPORTÂNCIA À ADEÇÃO E PARTICIPAÇÃO NESSAS REDES

REDES DE COOPERACIÓN: EL DISPARATE DE LAS MICRO Y PEQUEÑAS EMPRESAS DE BAHIA AL DAR IMPORTANCIA A LA ADHESIÓN Y PARTICIPACIÓN EN ESTAS REDES

Justina Tellechea*
justinatellechea@gmail.com

Horacio Nelson Hastenreiter Filho*
hnhfilho@gmail.com

* Universidade Federal da Bahia – Salvador/BA, Brasil

Abstract

Interorganizational cooperation, supported by public policy instruments in developed countries, is present in Brazil in localized cases with unquestionably favourable results, such as the successful Network Cooperation Program, coordinated by the state government of Rio Grande do Sul. However, in other regions of the country, there is a difficulty in ensuring the active participation of actors in collaborative processes, regardless of the high importance they attach to this participation. In this article, the possibility of stimulating the competitiveness of micro and small companies was evaluated by fostering the formation and development of cooperation networks. The survey results show that despite the low participation of these companies in cooperative actions, it is recognized that cooperation positively affects business competitiveness. In addition, it was found that the presence of Support Organizations to mobilize, create and oversee the rules applied to the cooperative process is seen as relevant and desired by most companies.

Keywords: Cooperation Networks, Interorganizational Cooperation, Competitiveness, MSEs, Collective Practices.

Resumo

A cooperação interorganizacional, apoiada por instrumentos de políticas públicas em países desenvolvidos, apresenta, também no Brasil, casos localizados de inquestionável sucesso, a exemplo do programa Redes de Cooperação, coordenado pelo governo do estado do Rio Grande do Sul. No entanto, em outras regiões do país, percebe-se uma dificuldade de garantir a participação ativa dos atores em processos colaborativos, independentemente da elevada importância que eles atribuem a essa participação. Neste artigo foi avaliada a possibilidade de estimular a competitividade baiana a partir do fomento à formação e desenvolvimento de redes de cooperação. Os resultados da pesquisa demonstram que apesar da baixa participação das empresas baianas em ações cooperativas, se reconhece que a cooperação interfere positivamente na competitividade empresarial. Complementarmente, verificou-se que a presença de Organizações de Suporte para mobilizar, criar e zelar pelas regras aplicadas ao processo cooperativo é vista como relevante e desejada pela maioria das empresas.

Palavras Chave: Redes de Cooperação, Cooperação Interorganizacional, Competitividade, MPEs, Práticas Coletivas.

Resumen

La cooperación interorganizacional, sustentada en instrumentos de política pública en países desarrollados, también presenta, en Brasil, casos localizados de incuestionable éxito, como el programa Redes de Cooperación, coordinado por el gobierno estatal de Rio Grande do Sul. Sin embargo, en otras regiones del país, se nota una dificultad para asegurar la participación activa de los actores en los procesos colaborativos, independientemente de la alta importancia que le dan a esta participación. En este artículo se evaluó la posibilidad de estimular la competitividad bahiana fomentando la formación y desarrollo de redes de cooperación. Los resultados de la encuesta muestran que, a pesar de la baja participación de las empresas bahianas en acciones cooperativas, se reconoce que la cooperación interfiere positivamente con la competitividad empresarial. Además, se encontró que la presencia de Organizaciones de Apoyo para movilizar, crear y velar por las reglas aplicadas al proceso cooperativo es vista como relevante y deseada por la mayoría de las empresas.

Palabras Clave: Redes de Cooperación, Cooperación Interorganizacional, Competitividad, MIPY, Prácticas Colectivas.

1. Introduction

Most smaller companies in the country face serious problems due to their technological and competitive lags (Antunes Junior e Klippel, 2007). The lack of scale hinders a series of activities and actions which favour better competitive conditions for these companies, and ends up frustrating their permanence in markets that host medium and large companies as competitors. As a remedial solution, many public policies aimed at Micro and Small Enterprise (MSEs) bet on encouraging cooperation and make them understand which allows practices unfeasible at the individual level to be made possible through inter-company interaction.

Interorganizational cooperation, supported extensively as an instrument of public policies in developed countries, involving, above all, companies active in the creative economy, also features, in Brazil, localized cases of unquestionable success, especially in the south of the country. In Rio Grande do Sul, more than 250 cooperation networks were formed and supported in the period from 2000 to 2015, encompassing a wide diversity of sectors. In Santa Catarina, dozens of productive sectors have collaboratively articulated companies, often constituting inter-municipal networks. In the Northeast of the country, however, the reality is quite different. Initiatives based on collective practices developed by micro and small companies (MSEs) in the region are extremely rare and not widespread as the cooperation networks themselves. In Bahia, the situation is not different. Few of the isolated initiatives of cooperation networks formed in recent years were consolidated and, in the same period, there has been no development of any relevant public or para-public initiative that has contributed to the competitiveness of MSEs by

promoting cooperation. This article aims to understand this phenomenon. Based on the undertaking of field research involving commerce and service companies from different segments, we sought to understand the permeability and business acceptance of programs based on the formation of cooperation networks.

The study, therefore, has as its main objective the evaluation of the level and conditions of business' adherence to programs based on the logic of associativism, which allows for the understanding and justification of the low level of cooperation between the MSEs in Bahia. As a result of the problem issue and this more general objective, the following specific objectives were established:

- Identify the current level of cooperation of MSEs in Bahia;
- Identify their willingness to cooperate;
- Identify the collective practices seen as the most relevant in the business sectors examined;
- Identify the main factors that inhibit the advance of cooperation between MSEs.

2. Cooperation, Inter-Organizational Cooperation And Cooperation Networks

In order to understand cooperation networks in the context of organizational studies, it is essential that the role of cooperation in the organizational and interorganizational context is assimilated, which is why the present item is structured in the three sub-items spelled out in its title.

2.1. Cooperation

Cooperation, in its different social contexts, has undoubted relevance in intra and interorganizational processes. From a sociological point of view, cooperation is understood as a form of social connection and can be perceived as a joint action in which people associate, formally or informally, to achieve the same objective. Etymologically, cooperation comes from the Latin verb *cooperari*, the junction of the prefix *co* (together) and *operari* (operate), so it means joint action that can be interpreted as the provision of help for a common purpose. In the literature, it is also possible to find the term “cooperation culture”, described as “a dialogue that takes place in an interdependent relationship, aiming, invariably, at the collective good, where different actors, in different places, in interaction, complementing each other, without opposing or mixing, they experience the challenge of being autonomous in action and interdependent in mission” (Barreto, 2003).

In this article, we sought to work with the broader sense of cooperation, expanding the individual's focus to organizational actions. For a better understanding of the situations that involve interorganizational cooperation, we sought to revisit the literature that emphasizes motivation as a catalyst for cooperation between companies and, therefore, it was necessary to include and understand the trust and reciprocity in these relationships. (Hastenreiter Filho, 2005 p. 20).

2.1.1. Motivation as a Catalyst for Cooperation

According to Verschoore (2004), two basic principles consolidate the motivation for cooperation by organizations. The first concerns the understanding that the aggregate contributions generate more value than the individual contributions of the elements, which means, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The second, on the other hand, highlights that in a cooperative process, relations between companies typically present win-win results. Therefore, companies are willing to collaborate with each other because they jointly hope to carry out actions that would be unfeasible individually, attaining higher levels of performance. For Amato Neto (2000), inter-company cooperation can minimize difficulties and make it possible to meet a series of company needs, needs that would be difficult to satisfy in cases where they act in isolation. Among these needs, the author highlights:

- Reduce the vulnerability of companies in relation to new competitors;
- Increase the capacity and speed of absorption of technical and managerial news;
- Combine skills and use the know-how of other companies;
- Sharing the burden of carrying out technological research, sharing the development and the acquired knowledge;
- Share risks and costs of exploring new opportunities, carrying out experiments together;
- To exert greater pressure on the market, increasing the competitive force for the benefit of the customer;
- Share resources, with special emphasis on those that are being underutilized;
- Strengthen purchasing power;
- Obtain more strength to operate in international markets.

Some authors, such as Mineiro et al. (2019), claim that contemporary researchers have been concerned with understanding the structure of networks from i) cooperative behaviours between different actors, ii) the level of communication through the exchange of information and learning between members,

and iii) trusting behaviours in the formation of such alliances, thus allowing for the analysis of the degrees of cooperation, from a diagnosis of the previous factors that motivate the formation of the networks, the results generated by it, up to the factors that hinder its creation and permanence.

As a result of these pressures and vulnerabilities, it can be said that the survival of cooperation is subject to two circumstances: its effectiveness and its efficiency. Effectiveness refers to the validation of your social (in this case, organizational) purpose. Efficiency is related to the satisfaction of individual motivations. The test of effectiveness is the fulfilment of a common purpose. The test of efficiency is obtaining a sufficient number of individuals who will continue to cooperate (Bernard apud Teixeira, Hastenreiter, Pires & Góes, 2011). Therefore, it can be inferred that cooperation depends on inter-related and inter-dependent procedures, which are linked to the cooperation system as a whole and, at the same time, to the satisfaction of the members. In other words, to achieve effectiveness and efficiency, individual and group opportunities are essential.

2.1.2. Trust and reciprocity

According to Deutsch (1960) and Smith, Carrol and Ashford (1995), one of the variables that most directly impacts the motivation for cooperation is trust. Among several definitions, trust can be interpreted as the propensity of a person to be conditioned to the actions of another person, based on the expectation that that other person will perform a specific action, which is important for those who trust, without the need to monitor or control that person (Mayer et al., Teixeira, Hastenreiter, Pires, Góes, 2011, p. 9). Based on this interpretation, it can be considered that the existence of trust precedes cooperation and reduces the uncertainties and risks of cooperative interorganizational relations. Trusting the other's reciprocity is a key component of cooperation: if during the cooperation process, each person or organization tries to obtain the maximum gain at the minimum cost for themselves, without considering the gains and costs for others, the process tends to be interrupted (Jones & George apud Teixeira et al., 2011, p. 9).

Mariz (2002) notes that in organizational studies, trust is identified in all types of relationships, whether they are personal, functional or, as it relates to this article, interorganizational. However, there is a fundamental difference between these types of relationships, since, once on the personal and functional level, trust is based on the question of giving credit to the other, whereas on the inter-organizational level, reciprocity is at the heart of the process of establishing trust between companies that use cooperation in the pursuit of common interests and goals (Balestro, 2002). Given the teleological nature of companies,

focused on profit and survival, there is no dispute that in the business environment trust is established, above all, as a process of rational choice, before becoming a social phenomenon.

Trust as a rational option can only be sustained through reciprocity. It is this mutual correspondence, in the relationship between companies, which contributes to reducing the risks of opportunism, encouraging the exchange of information, sharing know-how and specific technology (Hennart 1988; Kogut 1988 in Park, 1996 apud Mariz, 2002). However, there are some personal and cultural elements that facilitate or hinder the effectiveness of cooperation, as described in the table below:

Chart 1. Facilitating and impeding elements of cooperation

COOPERATION	
Facilitating Elements	Impeding Elements
Individuals clearly perceive their positive inter-dependencies and feel personally responsible for doing their part in the job.	The responsibility is diffuse, so that individuals do not commit themselves and let others do all the tasks.
The interactions are dense and frequent.	Individuals insult and criticize each other and interact in a negative and dissenting way.
Individuals have the social skills necessary for the group to function productively.	Individuals do not have the interpersonal skills necessary to work in small groups.
There is regular assessment of how social skills are being used.	Individuals never reflect on how they can improve their performance, leaving inefficient and inappropriate procedures to continue in practice.
Individuals assist one another.	Individuals do not help or assist each other.

Source: Adapted from Hastenreiter Filho, 2005.

Based on these findings, it is understood that ensuring a collaborative business stance, in which companies develop trust in each other and act with reciprocity, is not an easy task. One favourable factor is that there is the possibility of showing that the advantage gained through opportunistic behavior is fleeting, being quickly destroyed when individualistic behavior is adopted by all. (Hastenreiter Filho, 2005 p. 25).

2.2. Interorganizational Cooperation

Interorganizational cooperation is subject to different technical and economic conditions. According to Gray and Wood (apud Gollo, Silva, Predebon, Kolcenti, Balen, 2011), cooperation is a process through which different parties, having a vision of the different aspects of a problem, can collectively explore their differences. Also, according to these authors, cooperation occurs when stakeholders are faced with a situation / problem and are involved in an interactive process, using division of roles, rules and structures, to act or decide on issues related to the problem. Therefore, “Inter-firm cooperation exists when two or more act together to realize mutual gains” (Combs & Kethce apud Gollo; et al 2011).

According to Schmidt and Bannon (apud Teixeira et al., 2011), in intra and interorganizational relations, cooperation occurs under different conditions, which justifies the construction of different types of cooperative arrangements. Cooperation at the interorganizational level can take place with suppliers, customers, universities and can even involve potential competitors that operate in the same business segment, the type of cooperation that is the focus of this article. Silva, Fernandes & Paiva Júnior (2020) see this kind of cooperation as an innovative solution for economic problems and to gain competitiveness in industrial sectors.

It is also possible to identify in the literature strategies that take into account the situations of competition, stability, capitalization of relationships and at the same time manage to create value for all involved. These strategies are realized through different productive arrangements such as: clusters, strategic alliances and business networks (Gollo apud Gollo, 2011). The latest will be explored further in the next subitem.

2.3. Interorganizational Cooperation Networks

In organizational studies, a wide diversity of networks is presented. Consistent with their purposes, networks follow the most diverse denominations: collaborative, cooperation, interorganizational, learning, innovation. In any of the forms presented, they have received increasingly high levels of attention in academic publications.

According to Britto (2004), a network of companies is configured as a set of production or commercialization units operating in an interconnected way, while maintaining their individuality. The concept of Network, highlighted by Rosenfeld (apud VERSCHOORE, 2004), favors collaborative business activities carried out by different, usually small, groups of firms in order to generate sales and profits through, for example, joint exports, R&D, product development and problem solving. According to Migueletto (apud Gollo et al., 2011 p. 3), the network is an organizational arrangement formed by a group of actors, who articulate themselves - or are articulated by an authority - in order to achieve complex objectives, which would be unreachable in isolation. It is a space in which a shared vision of reality is produced, different types of resources are articulated and actions are carried out in a cooperative manner. Cooke, Morgan and Prince (1995) perceive networks as constituting a set of emerging practices, focused on development, based on: reciprocity, trust, learning, partnership and decentralization. Another approach to networks, presented by Fachinelli, Marcon and Moinet (2002), understands them as interorganizational alliances that have a collective project to increase the competitiveness of companies and that provide a specific dynamic to the pre-existing relations between them, which corroborates with the line presented

by Colet and Mazzato (2016) that assumes that the different ways of interorganizational relations are strategic and competitive alternatives, serving in the economic and social scope as a response to market demands, enabling the meeting of organizations' needs, which could not be supplied individually. In the view of Marin-Gonzalez, Freddy et al. (2019), the operation of a network is expressed by the flows of communication, exchange, and transactions between actors; norms and values that condition the conduct and forms of behavior. In the conception of Souza, Lemos & Silva (2020), networks can be elucidated through transitory links established in the productive processes, not only among enterprises, but among workers, as well.

Some authors propose typologies for interorganizational cooperation networks. Balestrin & Vargas (apud Gollo; *et al.* 2011 p. 4-5), for example, discuss the horizontal and vertical networks, presenting a map of conceptual orientation, in which we work through four quadrants, which are determined from two dimensions: cooperation or hierarchical link, on the vertical axis and informal convenience or formally established relationships by contracts, on the horizontal axis (Gollo et al., 2011, p. 5). According to these authors, the classification for these networks are:

- Vertical networks: based on the hierarchy, they can be configured as a supply chain.
- Horizontal networks: cooperation relationships are between companies that produce and offer similar products, working in the same sector of activity, cooperating with their own competitors.
- Formal networks: linked to contracts, rules. As an example, we have export consortia, joint ventures and franchises.
- Informal networks: based on trust, they are linked to coexistence between actors from different organizations and are formed without any type of formal contract.

For this study, it is important to understand the differences in purpose between horizontal and vertical networks. The horizontal networks of MSEs, the object of the empirical work and analysis of this article, often aim to achieve gains in scale and overcome the natural barriers imposed on these sizes of companies. As for vertical networks, the relationship between the different links in the production chain and the focus on learning prevails (Teixeira & Guerra apud Hastenreiter Filho, 2005).

From a rational point of view, it is easy to understand that firms are organized in a network because they hope that this form of organization can bring benefits to them. However, it is important to know the potential advantages envisaged by the firms that justify their choice for organization in networks.

Authors such as Murto-Koivisto and Vesalein (1994), point out six factors that influence companies to participate in interorganizational cooperation networks:

Chart 2. Factors that influence companies to cooperate with each other

FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE COMPANIES TO COOPERATE WITH EACH OTHER	
Personal and organizational learning	Synergy between companies
Cost reduction	Find and develop new business
Formation of critical mass to execute actions that are not viable for isolated companies	Market credibility

Source: Adapted Hastenreiter, 2005 p. 31

In addition, Doyle (2000), conducted a survey of 373 companies in the field of manufacturing and services in Australia and recorded the following benefits that justify the participation of companies in interorganizational networks:

Chart 3. Benefits of participating in interorganizational cooperation networks

BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION IN INTER-ORGANIZATIONAL COOPERATION NETWORKS	
Profitability	Expansion of funds
Sustainable growth	Greater export potential
Exchanging information	Sharing ideas
Quality of product / service	Staying in business
Achieving goals	Customer satisfaction
Business recognition	Collective marketing

Source: Adapted Hastenreiter, 2005 p. 32

The motivation for cooperation and networking is found in MSEs when they realize that the growing pressures for competitiveness, combined with their specific vulnerabilities and difficulties, make their survival in isolation extremely difficult.

3. Methodology

In order to achieve the objectives established for the article, a quantitative and qualitative field research was carried out. The research was developed from working groups formed by students from different courses enrolled in the discipline ‘Introduction to Administration’ at the Federal University of Bahia. Each group chose a business segment belonging to the service or trade sectors and carried out the research exclusively with Micro and Small Companies (MSEs) belonging to the chosen segment. Sixteen working groups participated in the process, with two business segments being examined simultaneously by two groups.

The following are the issues and processes adopted in the field research to achieve each of the specific objectives established.

3.1. Identify the current level of cooperation of MSEs in Bahia

In order to identify the levels of cooperation, companies were asked whether they carry out activities in cooperation with other companies and, if so, they were asked to describe the activities.

3.2. Identify the willingness to cooperate of MSEs in Bahia

The following questions were presented as an instrument to verify the willingness to cooperate among companies in Bahia:

- Do you believe that cooperation with other companies could boost your company's competitiveness? Why?
- Would you participate in a support program for the formation of a cooperation network if it was conducted by a support institution (eg SEBRAE, IEL, Universities)?

Regarding the second question, as a way to better understand what support institutions need to do to achieve adherence in processes of promoting cooperation, the positive responses were complemented with the following additional question:

- What is the main contribution that an institution that seeks to facilitate the cooperation process should bring to the development of cooperation networks?

3.3. Identify the collective practices seen as the most relevant in the studied business sectors

To identify the collective practices most capable of justifying cooperation between companies in each sector, a list was presented with eleven practices whose impacts on business competitiveness were assessed using a seven-point Likert Scale. The lower end of the scale was associated with a concept of total irrelevance of practice, opposed to the upper extremity, associated with a concept of great importance for it.

Based on the results, a view of the most relevant practices for SMEs was constructed and a comparative analysis was carried out between the segments to identify those that identify less and greater competitiveness gains through the adoption of collective practices among companies in their sector.

3.4. Identify the main factors that inhibit progress for cooperation between MSEs

In order to understand the low level of cooperation between companies in Bahia, the main difficulties observed by their representatives to achieve a higher level of cooperation with companies operating in the same segment, were raised. Then they wondered how these difficulties could be overcome.

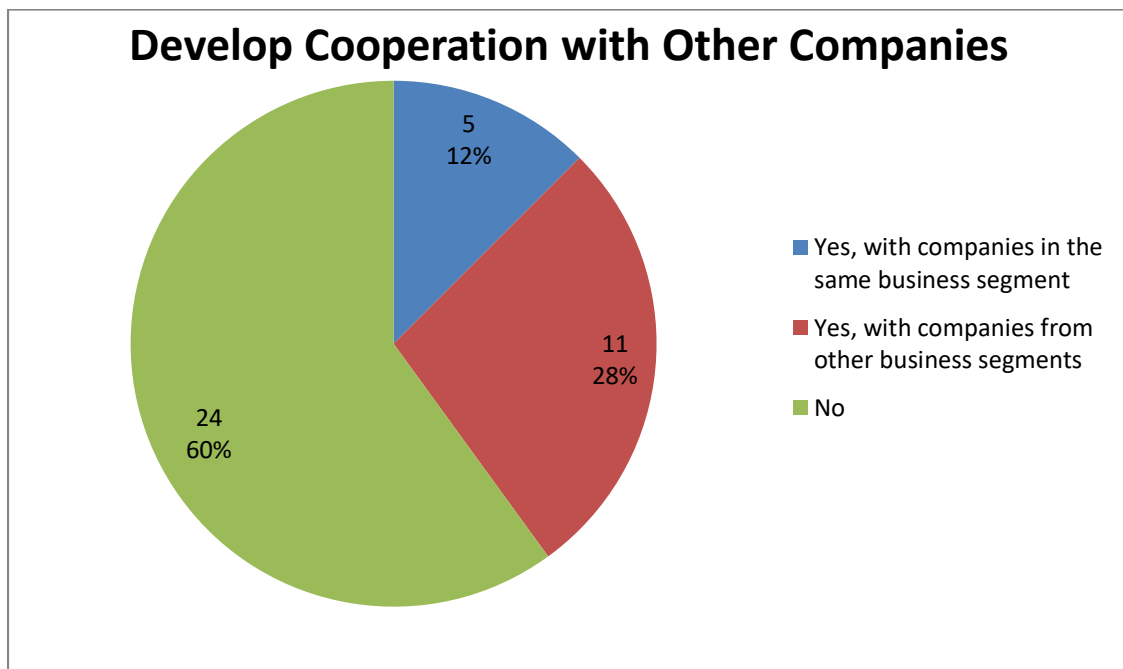
4. Main Results

The results presented below were obtained from field research involving fourteen different business segments in the areas of services and commerce and forty companies classified as MSEs. Initially, the consolidated research data will be presented so that the analyses and assessments related to the prospects of success for a possible program of cooperation networks in the state of Bahia will be derived from them.

4.1 Level of cooperation of companies in Bahia

Based on the question related to the development of cooperative activities with other companies, the answers fell into three distinct categories: companies that do not develop cooperation with other companies; companies that develop cooperation with companies that do not operate in their business segment; and companies that cooperate with their peers. For this question, 40 answers were obtained, distributed according to Figure 1.

Figure 1. Number and percentage of companies that develop cooperative practices



Source: Elaborated by the authors, 2022

It is observed that 24 of the 40 respondent companies (60%) do not develop cooperative practices with any type of organization. A significant percentage (28%) develops cooperation with companies in other sectors, which are not seen as direct competitors and only 12% of those interviewed cooperate with companies that operate in the same sector and can be seen as competitors.

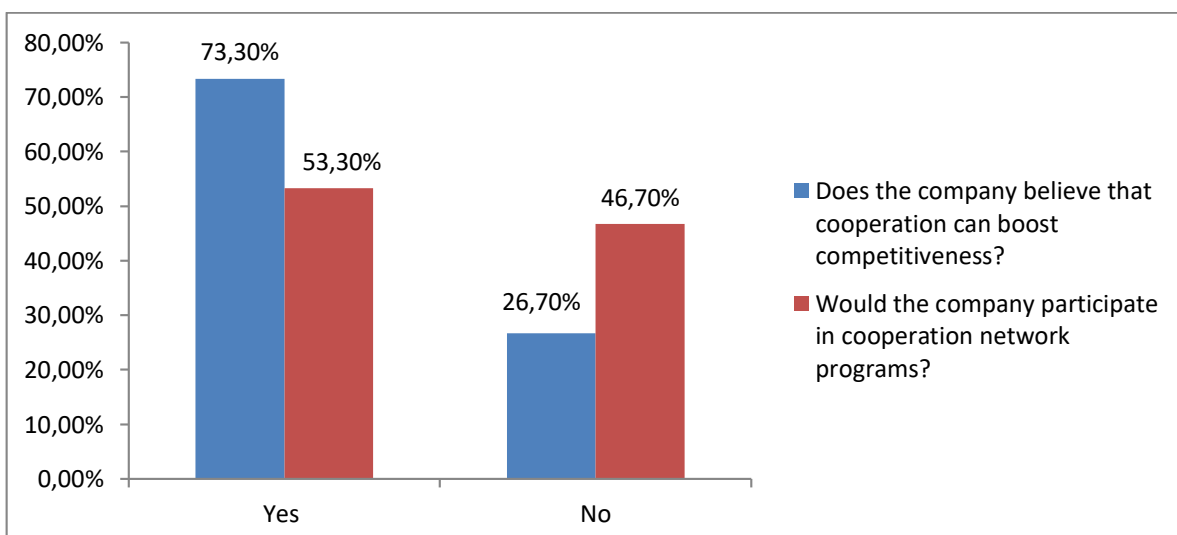
Among companies that cooperate with companies in other sectors, it is possible to observe examples of mutual service provision or the offering of complementary services. The first situation is observed in gyms that advertise restaurants and vice versa. In one of the cases mentioned, there is a cross-discount program. In the list of companies that provide complementary services, we highlight, among other examples, law firms with a focus on condominiums that develop partnerships with administration and accounting offices and fitness centers that are linked to physical therapy centers. It is observed, however, that even if any type of partnership is considered, only 40% of the companies surveyed carry out some type of cooperative activity.

4.2 Pre-disposition for the Cooperation of Bahian Companies

The willingness to cooperate was assessed based on two closed questions and one open question, the latter with the objective of identifying the contributions that companies would expect to receive from institutions that exercise the role of Support Organizations (SO) in the development of a network companies. There was a total of 30 respondents to these questions.

Initially, it was possible to observe, as shown in figure 2, that a significant percentage of companies (73.3%) believe that the adoption of cooperative practices can leverage their competitiveness. This figure also demonstrates that the majority, though not a significant one, of the companies (53.3%) is open to participate in programs based on cooperation networks developed and coordinated by Supporting Organizations.

Figure 2. Belief in Cooperation and Propensity to Join Cooperation Network Programs



Source: Elaborated by the authors, 2022

Among the companies that manifested themselves positively in relation to participation in network programs under the coordination of an SO, an attempt was made to identify which contributions were desired and/or expected from these institutions. Expectations are strongly differentiated by the different business segments. Two of the law firms interviewed assign SOs a regulatory role, aimed at preventing the devaluation of law services, with the establishment of minimum remuneration standards for different services. Also, attributing to the SOs the condition of regulators, one of the interviewed companies was more comfortable participating in cooperation networks if the SOs establish parameters for the conducts to be adopted by the members of the network and sanction mechanisms for non-compliant conducts.

Some organizations demand that the SOs perform an essentially facilitating role in the process, understanding that they can be important for the dissemination of information in relation to matters of general interest, the awareness of companies regarding the importance of participating in activities in networks, in addition to the presentation of real examples of collective practices that were able to leverage business competitiveness.

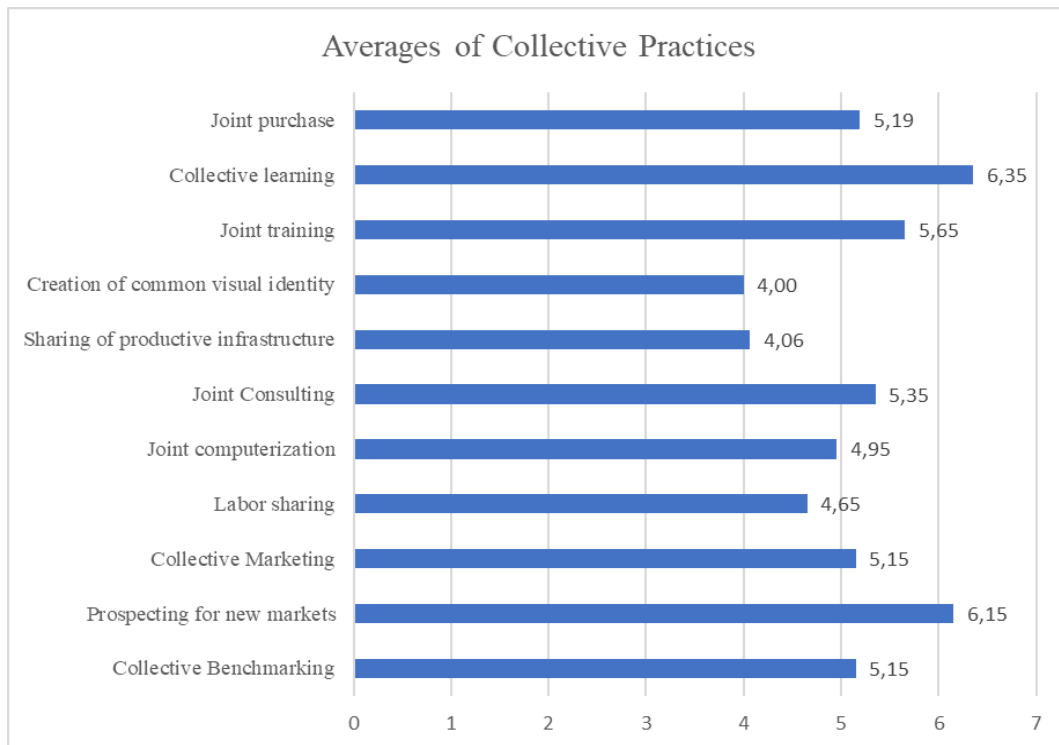
Another set of respondents highlighted aspects related to the creation of a sense of community among the participating companies, with the construction and diffusion of a common language among them that could lead to an equal understanding of the goals and objectives desired from the networks.

4.3 Identification of the collective practices seen as the most relevant

A set of eleven different collective practices had their degree of relevance assessed by 26 companies, according to a seven-point Lickert scale ((1) - Irrelevant and (7) - Very Important). As can be seen in figure 3, none of the practices had an average rating lower than 4.0, which indicates that all of them are assigned at least an intermediate relevance. Among those identified as more relevant were highlighted: collective learning (6.35); prospecting for new markets (6.15); and joint training (5.65). The average assessment of the importance attributed to the 11 practices was 5.15, which reinforces the importance attributed to the set presented.

Regarding the assessments of the averages of collective practices observed in the different sectors, sex shop companies stand out as those that see collective practices as the most promising (6.22) and law firms as those that give them less relevance (4.14). In the first case, the two companies surveyed have a history of cooperation. In the case of law firms, it was possible to identify that the sense of competition predominates, since the geographical barriers to competition are lower.

Figure 3. Evaluation of the Importance of collective practices for business competitiveness



Source: Elaborated by the authors, 2022

4.4 Factors that inhibit the progress of cooperation

Several factors have been identified as inhibiting the establishment of inter-organizational cooperation between companies that operate in the same business segment. The exacerbated competition was a justification with high frequency. In addition to this, a significant number of companies attributed the lack of trust and the time requested invested in the development of cooperative ties, as the reasons for restricting cooperation.

Two factors that had only one mention deserve to be reported on to highlight the demand for the insertion of Support Organizations as mediators. A company that operates in the food supplement segment demands an institutional presence to curb irregular competition, caused by companies that do not act according to the laws. A second one calls for institutional action that promotes dialogue between companies.

4.5 Results Analysis

Items 4.1 and 4.2. clearly point out that there is a gap between cooperation as a reality and cooperation as a possibility. While only 40% of companies currently develop some type of cooperative practice, with only 12.5% with companies operating in the same sector, 73.3% of companies believe in

cooperation as a mechanism for leveraging competitiveness. In addition, more than half (53.3%) say they are willing to integrate cooperation networks developed from programs coordinated by Supporting Organizations such as SEBRAE, IEL, Universities, etc.

Becker (2007) carried out a broad study, involving a set of cooperation networks in Rio Grande do Sul in order to understand the reasons that lead companies to participate in interorganizational networks. Among the main factors observed, the minimization of costs, the sharing of resources (technological, management and human) and the sense of belonging to a group with a high number of members were highlighted. The analysis of these factors shows that they require maturation and structuring, conditions that are absent in the initial moments of network operation and that demand social capital and trust. Social capital and trust, which do not exist a priori, will only be established with the development of the network and the success of its collective practices. This mutual and cross dependence indicates that the starting point for the formation of networks has strong inertia, which demands, as a rule, an external force to set it in motion. The Cooperation Networks Program, conducted by the government of Rio Grande do Sul, from its Secretary for Development and International Affairs, and in partnership with other institutions and the main universities in the state, fulfilled this role in the south of the country, creating an interinstitutional network of actors that allowed that more than 250 networks had been successfully developed in fifteen years.

The contradictions in the numbers of those that believe and practice cooperation in Bahia point out that a possibility of intervention in the network formation procedure, creating incentives for participation, can be a leverage factor for the process of inter-organizational cooperation between companies in this state. Supporting Organizations (SO) are seen by the different organizations surveyed as potential mediators, facilitators and stimulators of the cooperative process, able to establish themselves as the necessary external force to transform intention to participate in participatory action. For SO, however, it is not enough to intend to encourage organizations to act collectively, but they must launch and structure their support in the form of established programs with a strategic and integrated vision, bringing together the main and diverse actors who must act from shared and previously established objectives. Networks are favored by organized innovation ecosystems, quite different from what is observed in Bahia, which indicates that interorganizational cooperation networks are difficult to thrive without interinstitutional cooperation networks, formed by the actors who lead or should lead the local innovation systems.

When the demands for the performance of the SO are observed in the light of the main factors that inhibit inter-company cooperation, it is expected that a correct positioning of these organizations, assuming the condition of coordinators, facilitators and mediators of the process of formation and

operation of the networks, can stimulate the companies to join programs that work with network logic. Effective mobilization of the companies and the construction of a broad regulatory framework in relation to the conditions for entry and permanence of companies in the network programs can solve the main obstacles to cooperation identified: the lack of time for entrepreneurs and their fear of opportunistic and non-reciprocal behavior by other companies.

Among the collective practices highlighted as those that have the greatest capacity to leverage business competitiveness, collective learning stood out, which makes the proposal of forming networks based on the logic of learning and innovation, focused on the exchange of information, experiences, reflections and construction of good collective practices inviting.

Beyond the more general factors that favor cooperation, Doin, et al. (2020) address the relevance of conducting research that also considers the social dimensions, the costs linked to barriers to cooperation, as well as the local/territorial factors of the state of Bahia, for expanding the purpose of the analysis.

5. Conclusions

From the results observed from the research, it was possible to detect that, in spite of the current incipient level of cooperation observed among the MSEs in Bahia that work in the services and trade sector, the possibility of cooperating and participating in collective practices with other companies in the same sector is viewed positively by an expressive majority of the interviewed companies (73.3%).

Likewise, the role of support institutions in an eventual process of building a policy for competitiveness based on the formation of cooperation networks appears to be relevant, which is concluded by the expressive percentage (53.3%) of companies that declared themselves interested in participating in such initiatives, if invited. It was shown in the responses of the interviewees that the level of information about the gains and forms of participation in inter-organizational cooperation initiatives is still quite limited, coinciding with their demand for support institutions to be placed as providers of information. encouraging and facilitating the process of building and operating networks.

One aspect to be highlighted, in relation to the observed results, is that the collective practices evaluated as priorities suffer variations in the different business sectors. A limited number of business and company segments made up the sample of the research in question, which indicates that complementary research, involving a more comprehensive number of segments, can help to identify collective practices more appropriate to certain groups. As a result, one would have, for example, the identification of business segments where the most instrumental practices such as the purchase or joint prospecting of new markets

are the most relevant and the segments that can establish new parameters for the innovation agenda, from the adoption of practices such as training and collective learning. Thus, the agenda for building networks would start from the most effective collective practices to attract the participation of companies, serving as a starting point for establishing cooperation between organizations.

It is also registered that the level of articulation between the actors in the networks and their success has not been investigated, only the existence or not of some collaborative practice between companies in the same segment. Specific network approach methodologies can be applied in later studies with the aim of bringing the perspective of Social Network Analysis to the analysis of the maturity and intensities of the relationships established between the segments that present some level of cooperation.

Another limitation of the research is the failure to conduct interviews with the Support Organizations. The main institutions that have the potential to exercise this role with companies in Bahia have already developed programs to support Local Productive Arrangements, productive clusters and sectoral nuclei in the last decades, all of which value an agenda geared towards cooperation. The results, however, are seen by them as very timid. Opposing the view of those who place themselves in the conditions of providers and applicants for programs based on cooperation is interesting, in order to have a more in-depth analysis of the real possibilities and merits that a proposal for the development of competitiveness from the increase in cooperation levels can achieve in the state of Bahia.

Finally, it is important to recognize that the analysis of initiatives to increase competitiveness based on the promotion of cooperation, repeatedly, presents a restricted perspective, based exclusively on the possibility of results brought about by the adoption of collective practices. In these situations, the costs of overcoming barriers to resistance to cooperation and establishing minimum levels of trust and dialogue, which are indispensable for the sharing of interests, have been neglected by research and researchers, many of whom favor a pamphlet approach, where there is no space to balance the real advantages and costs for joining a cooperative process.

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Recebido em: 10/09/2020

Aceito em: 15/03/2023

Endereço para correspondência

Nome: Justina Tellechea

Email: justinatellechea@gmail.com



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