

Social and Environmental Sustainability in a Credit Union

Sustentabilidade socioambiental em uma cooperativa de crédito

Joice Petry¹ⁱ

Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9318-3306>

Cristiane Froehlich²ⁱⁱ

Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7198-6469>

Abstract

Socio-environmental sustainability is increased to companies' strategic plans when they understand the need to balance natural resources and provide quality of life to the community and profits. The research objective was to verify the perspectives of the interested parties on the socio-environmental sustainability actions of a cooperative credit agency located in the Vale Germânico area, Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. A descriptive, qualitative and quantitative case study was carried out. Data were collected through an interview with the person responsible for the socio-environmental sustainability sector and the application of questionnaires to 44 members, 8 employees, and a director of the credit union. The main results show that socio-environmental sustainability is a cooperative strategy. There are social initiatives with results perceived by the interested parties. However, environmental actions at a bank branch are challenging and need more attention.

Keywords: socio-environmental sustainability; credit cooperative; social and environmental actions.

Resumo

A sustentabilidade socioambiental é incrementada ao plano estratégico das empresas quando essas entendem a necessidade de equilibrar o uso dos recursos naturais, proporcionar qualidade de vida à comunidade e os lucros. O objetivo da pesquisa consistiu em verificar as perspectivas das partes interessadas sobre as ações de sustentabilidade socioambientais de uma agência de cooperativa de crédito, situada no Vale Germânico, no Rio Grande do Sul. Foi realizado um estudo de caso, descritivo, qualitativo e quantitativo. Os dados foram coletados por meio de uma entrevista realizada com o responsável pelo setor de sustentabilidade socioambiental e pela aplicação de questionários para 44 associados, 8 colaboradores e um diretor da cooperativa de crédito. Os principais resultados apontam que a sustentabilidade socioambiental é uma estratégia da cooperativa. Existem iniciativas sociais com resultados percebidos pelas partes interessadas. Contudo, as ações ambientais em uma agência bancária são desafiadoras e necessitam de maior atenção.

Palavras-chave: sustentabilidade socioambiental; cooperativa de crédito; ações socioambientais.

¹ Universidade Feevale – Novo Hamburgo – RS – Brasil. E-mail: joi.petry@hotmail.com

² Universidade Feevale - Novo Hamburgo - RS – Brasil. E-mail: cristianefroehlich@hotmail.com

1 Introduction

The accelerated pace of production requires companies and society to look for actions that slow down the use of natural resources. When choosing companies to purchase or use products or services, preferences are no longer solely based on prices. The new customer started to show a greater concern for the environment and the society in which they live and seek to interact with companies that care and are ethical (ANDRADE; TACHIZAWA, 2012).

The development of organizations has not always accompanied the concern to minimize impacts on nature and social issues. Current companies have redoubled the care with these impacts in planning their products or services, including due to pressure from society (SAFT, 2014). Given this context and the objectives of sustainable development, traditional business models tend to be insufficient to meet these demands, and it is necessary to innovate in the way of doing business (MORIOKA *et al.*, 2017).

We can explain that socio-environmental sustainability goes beyond the obligations imposed by law. In addition to fulfilling what is required, the organization looks at the external and internal environment and promotes actions that generate results for its employees and society. This way, it promotes actions that improve its image in the market while protecting the environment and improving the community's quality of life (ALIGLERI; ALIGLERI; KRUGLIANSKAS, 2009; OKAMOTO; BRELÀZ; PETRONI, 2015).

When the company understands the need to invest in social and environmental actions, it starts to develop a business model that measures the consequences that its actions cause and thus shows commitment to the future (ALIGLERI; ALIGLERI; KRUGLIANSKAS, 2009). Nosratabadi *et al.* (2019) corroborate by stating that

organizations that seek sustainability insert this concept into their corporate strategies, redesigning their business models.

It is worth mentioning that the relevance of socio-environmental sustainability in organizations also lies in the results that actions aimed in this direction cause in the communities in which they operate, both in terms of environmental issues, the impacts they cause, as well as the jobs offered to citizens and also the actions they adopt aimed at the community in which they are inserted (OKAMOTO; BRELÀZ; PETRONI, 2015).

Once socio-environmental sustainability is conceptualized, it is possible to mention a similarity with the cooperative essence. Cooperativism has seven guiding principles: free and voluntary membership; democratic management; members' economic participation; autonomy and independence; education, training, and information; interaction between cooperatives; and interest in the community. In addition, their ideal is to work together to achieve a common goal (SEBRAE, 2017) and socio-environmental sustainability, which aims at the good of the whole society and its environment, today and in the future (MORAIS *et al.*, 2015).

The proposal of the cooperative organization is the exchange of goods and knowledge to produce mutual help, whether in the agricultural, consumer, educational, credit, or even housing sectors. The practice of cooperation is a way of educating people, developing in them a broader, participatory, and human mentality (GAWLAK; RATSKE, 2007). When the members of a cooperative organization develop their roles, positive interaction is created, where the participant seeks to achieve their personal and professional goals, at the same time that the company uses the good performance of its employees to achieve its goal (CARVALHO; SILVA, 2017). Thus, it is believed that the sharing of ideas is what makes cooperatives a reality. As a result, we

seek to build and win together, making it possible to associate the sides: the economic and the social, the individual and the collective, productivity and sustainability (OCB, 2019).

In the literature, Fonseca *et al.* (2014) carried out a bibliometric study on cooperativism in its interface with the theme of sustainability. The authors used the Web of Science database and collected 144 articles from 2004 to 2013 and concluded that the identified articles addressed the idea that “the concept of sustainability is related to cooperation, but not directly to the concept of cooperatives as entities, society of people whose objective is the provision of services and not profit, but which has clear principles” (FONSECA *et al.*, 2014, p. 21).

Santos (2021) conducted a new survey in the Web of Science database in 2020 and concluded that most of the surveys did not refer to sustainability strategies in cooperative organizations; they dealt with the concept of cooperation or the issue of sustainability for the perpetuity of cooperative business models.

Given this context, the present work seeks to answer the following research problem: What is the stakeholders’ perspective on the socio-environmental sustainability actions of a cooperative credit agency? Notably, this study is limited to associates, employees, management, and the sector responsible for sustainability as the interested parties. The study’s objective was to verify the perspectives of the interested parties on the socio-environmental sustainability actions of a cooperative credit agency located in the Vale Germânico area in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil.

The importance of dealing with the cooperative’s socio-environmental sustainability is linked to its essence. Actions must be present and clear for both employees and associates, for, this way, it will more easily achieve the goals and objectives proposed concerning sustainability. Amid constant changes and

increasing market demands regarding the delivery of companies, socio-environmental sustainability is shown not only as a way of seeking differentiation but also of doing its part in building a better environment. Alcivar *et al.* (2020) highlight that the main characteristics of the business movement have taken into account the balance of financial, human and environmental capital. From this point of view, cooperatives are organizations that actively contribute to sustainability.

Therefore, as an empirical contribution, this study contributes to the advancement in the literature regarding socio-environmental sustainability in credit unions and serves as a basis for people and companies seeking socio-environmental solutions by optimizing sustainability principles and practices. In this sense, Santos (2021) points out that it can be an opportunity for cooperatives to identify new perspectives on sustainability actions in a cooperative organization.

2 Social and Environmental Sustainability in the Context of a Credit Union

The management of organizational sustainability is a new paradigm discussed in academia and companies. It involves balancing the economic, environmental, and social pillars of sustainability in organizations, the Triple Bottom Line (TBL) (OLIARI *et al.*, 2019). For the TBL principle to be successful, it is necessary to balance all dimensions of sustainability in the life cycle of projects (GOH *et al.*, 2020).

Therefore, the challenges for economic agents are to seek evolution and maximization of profitable results based on socio-environmental management. Companies need to present socio-environmental policies (MARTINS; RAZUK, 2012), which must be designed to meet current and future human needs (BARBIERI, 2012). According to Câmara (2009), there cannot be strategies based

solely on the ecological issue; it is necessary to pay attention to social needs.

One of the biggest mistakes organizations make, in addition to separating social and environmental factors, is separating them from planning plans. As highlighted by Aligleri, Aligleri, and Kruglianskas (2009), there is no sense for a company to develop social projects in a community if, in carrying out its activities, it pollutes nature, submits employees to unsafe work situations, maintains relationships with suppliers that use child labor or do not pay due taxes

Okamoto, Breláz, and Petroni (2015) add that sustainability in corporations concerns the best use of resources, generation of less waste, and its correct and conscious disposal. On the social issue, the notion that the employee is an essential part of the company's functioning is necessary. The same importance is given to the customer, who must have their needs measured and understood so that the product or service is increasingly closer to what they need.

Society and employees pressure companies to develop business strategies focused on socio-environmental issues upon understanding this need for socio-environmental sustainability. Those that have values and encourage sustainable attitudes and behaviors have the potential to attract customers and qualified candidates (MACHADO; OLIVEIRA, 2009).

Corporate socio-environmental sustainability is formed by a set of actions that avoid or reduce the impacts caused by companies on the environment and stakeholders. It is worth mentioning that leadership is essential in this process, as leaders have knowledge about socio-environmental strategies and actions and facilitate the implementation of socio-environmental sustainability in the other hierarchical levels of the company (HANSEN; FROEHLICH; SCHREIBER, 2021).

To establish stakeholders' understanding and commitment to the ongoing socio-environmental sustainability process, organizations need to issue publications in social balance sheets and sustainability reports, as well as the adoption of codes of ethics, shared with all the hierarchical and public levels that interact with the company (ANDRADE; TACHIZAWA, 2012).

To determine an organization's degree of socio-environmental sustainability, it is necessary to measure the following variables, according to Coral, Rosetto, and Selig (2003, p. 11): "ability to implement strategies, the environmental impact of the activity, resources availability, market growth, competitive position, the vision of the leader and social responsibility". Knowing which variables are interconnected and form the degree of sustainability of the business makes it easier to analyze the critical point to be improved and seek evolution over time (CORAL; ROSETTO; SELIG, 2003).

It should be mentioned that, to measure sustainability, indicators emerge, and their role is to establish an overview that requires a results process concerning the established sustainability objectives. Indicators can describe a state or a response to phenomena that occur in a medium; that is, an indicator represents a way of perceiving reality that occurs through a set of data representing parameters capable of translating the state of an environment (RAMETSTEINER *et al.*, 2011; KUZMA *et al.*, 2020).

When a company can invest in actions aimed at socio-environmental sustainability, there is still the challenge of making everyone within the company understand the importance of being part of this idea (FROEHLICH, 2014). Table 1 presents the benefits of socio-environmental sustainability for each stakeholder.

Table 1 – Social and environmental sustainability for stakeholders

Stakeholders	Benefits
Associates	The actions distinguish a company that invests in socio-environmental sustainability it proposes, as is the case of a subsidiary of a multinational operating in the industrial chemistry segment with an emphasis on water treatment. In this organization, employees are encouraged to innovate and create patents. With each patent created, the employee receives awards and has their name exposed on a bronze plaque and their patent number, which is a source of pride. We noticed that both the company and the employee gain from this, which is very positive, as it generates satisfaction in working with an organization that thinks about the well-being of its employee (GALVÃO; PATAH, 2015).
Community	Companies that choose to adhere to actions concerned with socio-environmental sustainability are automatically acting to reduce environmental degradation and help control social inequality and poverty. This way, the community is favored with a better environment to live in (PANTUFFI; BRUNSTEIN, 2018).
Suppliers	Seeking a relationship with sustainable suppliers is seen by company leaders as maximizing value generation and, as a consequence, increasing competitive advantage. This is because the organization will be maintaining the quality of its products from production to final delivery (NORO <i>et al.</i> , 2010).
Customers	Customers feel more satisfied and calm when buying from sustainable companies and giving preference to them. Most consumers no longer mind paying a little more if the company promotes sustainable actions (SOSCHINSKI; JUNIOR, 2018).
Shareholders	When the company seeks to adapt to attitudes towards sustainability, it becomes more competitive because, by reducing the use of raw materials and reusing materials, the company causes less impact on the environment and becomes more productive automatically. In addition, environmental practices make the company stand out from its competitors, presenting a better image and earning customers' admiration and loyalty. Thus, it generates profitability for the company and, consequently, gains for shareholders (ROSA <i>et al.</i> , 2015).

Source: Prepared by the authors.

Some benefits are pointed out by Oliveira and Serra (2010) when implementing socio-environmental sustainability actions in an enterprise, such as the conquest of new markets, customer loyalty, greater ease in obtaining bank loans, improvement of the company's image, and employee self-esteem. The community is a stakeholder of an organization. Therefore, when a company commits to being transparent with its public without impacting nature, it must comply. If the measures are not taken, you will not be effective in sustainable management (SOUZA; JÚNIOR; REGO, 2017).

The benefits of sustainability practice can extend to financial savings by providing a safer work environment through social and environmental education practices. Each stakeholder of the organization has individual needs and particularities. The company manages to reach each of them when it instructs people to think about actions (ALIGLERI; ALIGLERI; KRUGLIANSKAS, 2009).

In Brazil, the first cooperative created was in the agricultural sector, called the Economic Cooperative of Public Employees of Ouro Preto, in Minas Gerais, in 1889. In Rio Grande do Sul, it was in 1902 that a Swiss priest named Theodor Amstad founded the first cooperative that exists to date in the credit field, founded in the city of Nova Petrópolis because, at the time, there was no bank in the city (GERAÇÃO COOPERAÇÃO, 2017). The purpose of any cooperative organization is the exchange of goods and knowledge for cooperation. According to Gawlak and Ratske (2007), whatever the branch, this cooperation practice educates people and helps develop a broader, participatory and human mindset.

For a cooperative to start functioning, the members must establish Bylaws based on rules that govern the acts. It is the right and duty of each member to have a copy of the Statute and seek to know and understand the rules established and voted on at the General Assembly

(GAWLAK; RASTKE, 2007).

Cooperatives represent important income distribution mechanisms in regional terms, as the economy generated by them circulates only within the region in which they are located, with a commitment to community development, unlike the capitalist form, where the money can be allocated to locations outside the region, not staying where it was generated (PORTAL DO COOPERATIVISMO FINANCIAL, 2019).

Finally, socio-environmental sustainability proposes that organizations need to be concerned about developing actions that value the well-being of employees, taking into account their interests, values, and beliefs, respecting the communities in which they operate, their customers and suppliers, as well as the rights of its shareholders and the legislation in force.

By appreciating the conscious use of environmental resources, respecting the regeneration of ecosystems, avoiding waste, making the conscious disposal of materials, organic or not, avoiding contamination and pollution, companies will obtain greater commitment and satisfaction from employees and customers.

In this scenario, cooperatives understand that people are above any operation, whether employees, associates, or directors; whoever is involved must preserve their nature. Moreover, working together to achieve the same socio-environmental objective will be effective and will happen faster than working individually.

3 Method

This research is a descriptive, qualitative, and quantitative case study which consists of a credit cooperative located in a city in the Vale Germânico area in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. The agency has 8 employees and around 4,000 members who maintain their banking relationships in the cooperative. This agency is part of a

national cooperative credit system, composed of 108 cooperatives, present in 24 states with approximately 5 million members. It is noteworthy that the institution was founded in 1902 by a priest and 19 leaders inspired by a German model of cooperativism. All agencies cooperate but act regionally to fulfill their role of cooperating to build better communities in the surroundings (INTERNAL DOCUMENT, 2021).

Agencies of this system offer all solutions that banks provide; the difference is that the person is seen as a bank customer, while, in the cooperative system, the person becomes a business partner who, with the contribution of social capital when entering the cooperative, has the right and duty to decide, together with others, the direction of the business. The difference between a common financial institution and a cooperative is that the results generated by the cooperative, which come from members' bank transactions, are divided between them. In addition, it reverts to the community in the form of investments in social projects (DOCUMENTO INTERNO, 2021). The cooperative obtained the seventh position in the country in the World's Best Banks 2021 ranking prepared by Forbes and Statista (CAMPO GRANDE NEWS, 2021).

It is worth mentioning that the cooperative has had a socio-environmental sustainability policy since 2012. The relationship sector has been responsible for the plan of sustainable strategies and actions since 2018 and has 3 employees. The manager of this sector was a participant in this research, chosen to participate in the interview to report on the cooperative's structure, functioning, and socio-environmental actions. The interview script was prepared based on the theoretical framework and adapted from Froehlich (2014). The interview was conducted in July 2019, and he was named in this research as "Interviewee 1". The interview lasted around an hour.

The 8 employees of an agency of the cooperative and 1 member of the board were selected to answer a questionnaire. The director holds the position of Executive Director. The collaborators were all those who worked in the study unit. A questionnaire was developed from Froehlich's (2014) and Saft's (2014) adaptation and sent by e-mail in August 2019. Respondents were called R1, R2, and so on to analyze the results.

The sample of associates is characterized as non-probabilistic (GIL, 2011). The researcher chooses the sample members based on experiences and needs (MASCARENHAS, 2012). The sample does not present a mathematical or statistical foundation for being defined in this research by the greater ease of access. The main characteristic of this sampling is the greater practicality of being able to choose people with better access. Thus, the research fits as a convenience sampling, when the researcher is free to select elements he has access to (GIL, 2011). The researcher selects a certain part of the research universe because he believes that this sample represents the purpose of the research (MARCONI; LAKATOS, 2002).

Therefore, 80 members were selected from a total of 4,000. The questionnaire was based on Saft (2014) and was physically delivered and sent by e-mail in August 2019. A response was obtained from 44 associates within the specified collection period. For data analysis, the respondents were named A1, A2, and so forth. It should be noted that suppliers are not part of the scope of this research, as they are not directly linked to this unit of the cooperative since purchases are made by the headquarters located in Nova Petrópolis-RS. The community is already partially included in the membership, as more than 70% of the city's economically active population is associated with the cooperative being studied.

An internal document was analyzed that addresses socio-environmental sustainability within the cooperative as a system; that is, it governs and portrays the cooperative's sustainability actions throughout Brazil. This document is a report that is available on the cooperative's website.

The qualitative content analysis technique was used to analyze the qualitative research data. To Prodanov and Freitas (2013), the analyses are developed from the empirical evidence related to the theoretical framework and the researcher's position through triangulation. This process can be defined as activities that involve data reduction, categorization, interpretation, and report writing. Because there are no predefined formulas or recipes to guide researchers, qualitative analysis depends on the researcher's ability and style. The analysis is performed concomitantly with the data collection; it only ends when there is nothing more to add to the data. In addition, it helps in conceptual development (GIL, 2011).

The answers obtained through the interview and the questionnaire applied to employees, associates, and board members allowed the researchers to comment on the relationship between what they say and the cooperative's socio-environmental sustainability report and the socio-environmental sustainability report theoretical framework, contemplating the qualitative analysis.

A descriptive analysis was carried out by elaborating tables to analyze the quantitative results achieved through the questionnaires. First, the questionnaires answered by the collaborators were grouped. To trace their profiles, a table was created to present the denomination used (R1, R2, ...), their level of education, position in the cooperative, time in the cooperative, and gender, along with other tables, where the answers were grouped, written in the order of each respondent, and analyzed according to the result.

To analyze the questionnaires answered by the associates, all the answers were grouped, and, in each proposed question, we observed how many marks each option obtained. Some results were described, and others were presented in table form for better identification. Gil (2011) says that quantitative analysis requires more detailed work, where the data collected must initially be tabulated. After analyzing the tabulation, the data must be described, creating correlations between the conclusions reached.

The analysis was divided into three categories: the first category presents the cooperative's sustainability structure and addresses the answers obtained from the interview with the person responsible for the sector, together with the document analysis and the theoretical basis; the second category presents the employees' point of view regarding the cooperative's socio-environmental sustainability, and the third category shows the associates' point of view regarding the cooperative's socio-environmental sustainability.

4 Result analyses

4.1 Cooperative Sustainability Structure

This section contextualizes socio-environmental issues in the cooperative's strategic planning, a structure designed to manage socio-environmental actions, and the barriers and challenges to managing sustainability in the organization.

“Socio-environmental sustainability is born in a cooperative in its creation”, according to Interviewee 1 (I1). However, it is necessary to have guidelines, plans, strategies, and actions to ensure that the subject remains active and expands in the company. One of these guidelines refers to the socio-environmental sustainability policy, built collaboratively by the cooperative; it encompasses all units, with a document review in 2015. Socio-environmental sustainability is part of the business strategies and is addressed by the executive and administration boards

throughout the construction of the cooperative's strategic planning (I1).

As the cooperative is involved with its communities, I1 justified that it invests in socio-environmental sustainability to maintain the value chain involved in the cooperative's business. When asked how the cooperative invests in the subject, he cited the cooperative's sustainability policy that was disseminated to all interested parties through the website and assemblies. In this sense, Filho (2009) believes that all companies have economic objectives but must pursue environmental and social results, as sustainability must be an integrated part of their role as an organization.

Some practical examples that socio-environmental sustainability permeates the cooperative's strategic planning are investments in social programs; offering the right financial solution at the right time and to the right associate, making it good for them, not just a way to achieve the goal; the implementation of credit and consortium for solar energy that promote environmental sustainability (I1).

Regarding the structure of the cooperative's socio-environmental sustainability area, I1 explained that the responsibility for maintaining this theme in the cooperative lies with the relationship management that coordinates the sustainability committee. The sector is located at the headquarters in Nova Petrópolis (RS), where strategic and administrative functions are concentrated. He reinforces that all employees are encouraged to think about the subject and have their actions based on sustainability; for such, training on the subject is carried out in a distance format and is part of the basic training program for employees. Thus, the cooperative encourages employees to think about socio-environmental sustainability, confirming what Jacobi (1999) says is important.

Andrade and Tachizawa (2012) stated the need to issue information on socio-environmental sustainability to all

parties involved, whether in social balance sheets, reports, or courses, as is the case with the cooperative with its employees as long as the information is transparent. According to I1, the cooperative has been publishing the Sustainability Report since 2015, in addition to training.

When asked about the barriers and challenges to managing socio-environmental sustainability in the cooperative, the interviewee says that “it is the way of thinking of the parties involved, the knowledge and engagement of employees”. The same is said by Froehlich (2014), who sees the interaction and understanding of everyone within the company as a barrier to realizing that sustainability is something important and that everyone must be part of this idea for results to emerge. As for the perceived benefits, the interviewee commented that associates seek credit more consciously and carefully so as not to generate negative impacts on society or the environment. Some testimonies prove and consolidate the importance of social projects promoted by the cooperative in social actions.

In summary, the cooperative’s socio-environmental actions are Social Fund, which supports non-profit organizations; União Faz A Vida, which has projects that promote the principles of cooperativism and citizenship in schools; Scholarships in agricultural schools for children of associates; Family Succession Program, in the form of lectures to support children to remain on their parents’ properties; Financial Education Program, with lectures for employees, associates, and the community; Business Consulting Program, as a way to contribute to the management of associated companies; financing of solar energy as a renewable source of energy; Crescer, a program to expand members’ knowledge of

cooperativism; analysis of socio-environmental risks and opportunities of credit operations; electricity control with the installation of sensors in branch bathrooms (SUSTAINABILITY REPORT, 2018; INTERVIEWEE 1, 2019).

According to the interviewee, the results of these socio-environmental sustainability actions aimed at stakeholders are measured by the cooperative’s headquarters and disclosed to members through the Sustainability Report and the assemblies that take place annually in each city in the area of operation. For employees, strategies and actions are disseminated through the same means as associates and training in a distance format and meetings at branches. Machado and Oliveira (2009) mention that companies that encourage and practice attitudes, projects, and programs aimed at socio-environmental sustainability have a greater potential to attract loyal customers and more qualified candidates as a result.

From the analyzed data, it was possible to verify that the cooperative keeps the sustainability issue active in the strategic planning. In order to become more present and with results, it is necessary to engage the internal public, reaching out to associates and the community.

4.2 Employees’ Point of View regarding the Cooperative’s Social and Environmental Sustainability

A questionnaire was prepared and applied to a cooperative’s administrative board member to identify whether the agency’s employees know the cooperative practices regarding socio-environmental sustainability concerning planning and actions. Table 2 presents the profile of the respondents.

Table 2 – Profile of the respondents

Denomination	Position	Level of Education	Time	Gender
Respondent 1	CEO	Postgraduate	20 years	Male
Respondent 2	Business manager	Graduated	5 years	Female

Respondent 3	Administrative assistant	Higher Education in progress	6 years	Female
Respondent 4	Financial Administrative Manager	MBA	10 years	Female
Respondent 5	Agency Manager	Graduated	11 years	Female
Respondent 6	Business manager	Graduated	10 years	Female
Respondent 7	Cashier	Higher Education in progress	4 years	Female
Respondent 8	Business manager	Graduated	6 years	Female
Respondent 9	Business manager	MBA	2 years	Male

Source: Research data.

Based on each respondent’s job description, education level, time in the cooperative, and gender, it is possible to verify that the agency has more female business managers, with a higher education degree or in progress, with an average of 6 years of cooperative time.

Initially, the question was: “How does the company define socio-environmental sustainability?” Respondents 2 and 8 mentioned the socio-environmental risk and the cooperative’s concern in granting credit. Respondents 3, 6, and 9 pointed out that sustainability for the cooperative is management based on the principles and values of cooperativism, seeking member satisfaction and economic, social, and environmental development. Respondent 3 added that the cooperative thinks about the needs of others. In the same line of thought, respondents 1, 4, 5, and 7 said that the cooperative seeks to achieve social and environmental sustainability through the profits that generate financial sustainability.

Therefore, we know that all respondents associated socio-environmental sustainability with the concept of Triple Bottom Line, involving the social, environmental, and economical, and with the principles of cooperativism. According to Morais *et al.* (2015), the Triple Bottom Line suggests the organization’s growth is based on the economic, social, and environmental pillars. This way, the company shows itself to be responsible, as it generates profits, protects the environment, and provides a quality of life for the people with whom it interacts.

We checked with the respondents the motivations that led the cooperative to invest in socio-environmental sustainability. As the main answers, the motivation is to achieve the cooperative’s main purpose, which is “to build better communities together” (R1, R2, R5, R7); and the motivation to move toward the principles and values of cooperativism (R3, R4, R6, and R9).

Employees were asked whether these are incorporated into the strategic planning by considering the principles of socio-environmental sustainability. Unanimously, all answered yes, and respondents 2, 3, 5, 6, and 7 justified that the cooperative incorporates these principles into planning according to its purpose. Respondent 3 added that the cooperative respects the place’s social peculiarities and economic vocation. When asked if the cooperative has an environmental and social analysis policy, all respondents knew and answered yes before releasing credit to an associate. Respondent 1 emphasized that granting credit is prohibited for members who harm the environment. Respondent 9 commented on using risk rating platforms aimed at operations within technical and legal parameters.

When the principles and purpose are aligned with socio-environmental sustainability, it reflects the ethical and responsible image that the cooperative seeks to convey. Therefore, organizations should begin to strategically determine their objectives and purposes to maintain their reputation in society (ALIGLERI; KRUGLIANSKAS, 2009).

Employees said that the cooperative's socio-environmental sustainability actions are disseminated through social networks, reports in newspapers circulating in the region where they operate, meetings with employees, meetings with members, and training. In comparison with the answer of Interviewee 1 on how the results are disclosed, it can be seen that the main means of disclosure was not remembered by the employees, the Sustainability Report, which is available for access by all employees on the internal platform, and can be accessed by "Google".

The last question consisted of knowing the cooperative's socio-environmental sustainability actions. All respondents mentioned social actions and did not mention environmental actions. The fact that employees did not indicate environmental actions may be in line with what Ribemboim (2009) says, that society believes that the waste and debris produced are natural consequences of the processes, and therefore its attention is not usually focused in this direction. Besides mentioning social actions, Respondent 1, director of the cooperative, reported on the environmental issue in the cooperative. He pointed out that solar panels are being installed at the cooperative's headquarters. Moreover, it will be included in the cooperative's strategic planning that by 2022 all agencies must have some source of renewable energy.

From the analysis of the questionnaire applied to the internal public of an agency, we found that employees are aligned with the purpose of the cooperative and understand that "building better communities" is related to socio-environmental sustainability actions. However, when asked what actions the cooperative carries out, employees pointed to social examples and did not mention environmental actions. There is, therefore, the possibility of working better with the dissemination of these cooperative actions.

4.3 Associates' Point of View regarding the Social and Environmental Sustainability of the Cooperative

Following the research, data were collected to verify the perspective of cooperative members on the subject. Of the 44 respondents, 30 are female, and 14 are male. The associates in the age group from 21 to 30 years old correspond to 50%, followed by 27% aged between 31 and 40 years old. As for the level of education, 34% have higher education, and 32% have secondary education. Notably, 64% have more than 10 years of cooperative association, and 23% have been associated with the cooperative for up to 10 years. The profile shows that most of the respondent members were women, aged between 21 and 30 years, with a high school or higher education degree and more than 10 years of association in the cooperative.

We sought to determine what is considered most important by members when choosing a financial institution. From the answers, it was evident that the one with the highest score was "customer relationship", followed by "agility", "investment in socio-environmental sustainability", "price", and "quality". This way, associates do not see socio-environmental sustainability as the most important item when choosing a financial institution, losing out to customer relationships and agility. However, it is viewed with greater importance than the price or fees charged and the quality of service provided. Dias (2011) explained that not seeing the company solely as a production unit but as an organization is gradual. Society can take some time to see the company as a social system, which, in addition to distributing goods and services, must preach the importance of respecting human rights and preserving the environment.

The next question addressed the associate's perception of the investment made in socio-environmental sustainability by financial institutions. Most respondents

cited socio-environmental sustainability as very important in this question, with 26 respondents corresponding to 59%. A total of 17 associates (39%) consider it important. Only one person was indifferent concerning the matter. Thus, it is clear that there is a concern about sustainability on the part of the associates. Furthermore, they understand the importance of financial institutions paying attention to and investing in this regard.

When thinking about socio-environmental sustainability, we asked which institution the respondents remembered. Forty members answered the cooperative itself, which is seen as a reference on the subject. Machado and Oliveira (2009) said that when the company is remembered as a reference, employees and society believe in it, use more of its resources, and work with more energy.

The next question sought to identify whether the associates are aware of the socio-environmental actions of the cooperative. We found that associates know social actions better compared to environmental actions. The practice most remembered by associates is support for social projects and sponsorship of community events. To Coral, Rosetto, and Selig (2003), social sustainability is most remembered as it directly affects the individual. Both social and environmental practices are disclosed by financial institutions so that their customers, associates, and society, in general, are aware of the actions.

The question presented six options to tick to determine how the cooperative's members receive information on its sustainability actions. The most mentioned means of communication was the presentation at the cooperative's assemblies, with 23 responses, followed by the internet, with 19 responses, the service unit, with 17 responses, the annual report with the cooperative results, delivered at the assemblies, with 12 responses. The least cited media were televisions and radios, with 8 responses. Jacobi (1999) said that, in

addition to investing in initiatives aimed at sustainability, organizations should encourage and disseminate them to form interlocutors and participants, which generates a sense of belonging and responsibility for all involved.

The next question sought to know the opinion of the associates as to why the cooperative develops socio-environmental sustainability actions. Respondents pointed out "that the cooperative invests in sustainability due to the concern to promote the development of its members and the community where it operates". Forty-one associates marked this option.

The last question provided space for members to suggest some socio-environmental sustainability action that is not yet developed by the cooperative but that they would like to see. Associates A3, A19, A36, A37, and A44 recommended environmental sustainability actions. They reinforced the need to use recyclable and biodegradable materials, reduce the use of paper and plastic cups, and carry out campaigns involving businesses and schools to generate awareness and encourage reforestation.

Respondent A17 suggested that the cooperative invest in micro-transport for displacement within cities to reduce carbon monoxide generation. A32 advised that the printing of annual reports, delivered at the meetings, be reduced, and the download of the file by the associate's cell phone could be encouraged. A40 highlighted the importance of adapting agencies to photovoltaic energy. A41 suggested educational projects to encourage bicycles and public transport and sponsorship to improve streets and pavements so that they are accessible.

A6, A7, A10, A31, and A34 suggested social actions. A6 indicated that the cooperative includes people without an income and from needy communities in its professional base. A7 highlighted that the União Faz A Vida project is important for the community and that it should include not only children but also their parents so

that they are part of cooperative education. Still, in this line, A34 suggested focusing on cooperative education so that young people grow and know how to cooperate more. A10 indicated the creation or support of humanitarian foundations. A31 highlighted the creation of an incentive in the form of interest on cheaper financing for sustainable companies.

Given the responses obtained by the members, it can be said that they are aware of the cooperative's sustainability actions and are aware of the importance of this topic. This can be seen from one of the questions, which asked whether investments in socio-environmental sustainability in the cooperative are very important, important, or not very important, and 98% of the members cited it as important or very important. In a relationship between an associate and a

financial institution, associates cite two factors as more important than socio-environmental sustainability, namely, the relationship with the client and the agility in the processes, respectively. However, based on the data, if an associate chooses two financial institutions with the same structure, one invests in socio-environmental sustainability, and the other does not; the majority will choose the organization that invests in the theme. The associates identified the importance of investing in socio-environmental sustainability and believe the cooperative is a reference. However, they do not know about the cooperative's environmental actions and even suggested environmental actions to add to social actions.

Table 3 summarizes the three categories of research analysis results.

Table 3 – Summary of results

Cooperative sustainability structure	Employees' point of view regarding the socio-environmental sustainability of the cooperative	Members' point of view regarding the socio-environmental sustainability of the cooperative
“Socio-environmental sustainability is born in a created cooperative” (Interviewee 1). The board and directors deal with and insert the matter in the cooperative's strategic planning to keep up to date.	When questioning employees about how the company defines socio-environmental sustainability, employees understand that it is through financial sustainability that social and environmental sustainability is achieved.	Members were asked to rate what they considered most important when choosing a financial institution. The item with the highest score was “customer relationship”, followed by “agility”, “socio-environmental sustainability”, “price”, and then “quality”. It demonstrates that sustainability is considered more important than price and quality in a financial institution for the member respondents.
Some practical actions in the cooperative's day-to-day activities that bring socio-environmental sustainability to the fore are: understanding the member's needs, offering the right product at the right time in order to bring about a financial solution; investing in the social fund through programs in schools and social organizations; availability of credit and consortium for installation of solar energy plates.	For the respondents, the motivation that leads the cooperative to invest in socio-environmental sustainability is to achieve the purpose of the cooperative, which is: “to build better communities together”.	Through the questions applied to the associates, we noticed that they had more knowledge about the cooperative's social actions and could not remember environmental actions. In addition, they learn about the subject mainly through assemblies held once a year in every city where the cooperative operates.

<p>Among the challenges involving sustainability within the cooperative is the way of thinking of all parties involved. This is because we know the importance of stakeholder involvement so that sustainability makes sense throughout the chain. Moreover, there are the testimonies of the people who benefited from the social projects among the benefits.</p>	<p>The cooperative's examples of social and environmental actions, cited by employees, were only social actions, showing that they have space to work on environmental issues.</p>	<p>Space was opened for suggestions for social and environmental actions from the members, and among them are the inclusion of parents in the União Faz A Vida project, which today only includes students and teachers; cheaper financing rates for sustainable companies, and reduce the use of paper and plastic cups in branches.</p>
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Source: Prepared by the authors.

Table 3 summarizes the main results of the research categories, highlighting stakeholders' perspectives on the socio-environmental sustainability actions of a credit union agency. It can be seen that the cooperative seeks to act according to the concepts of socio-environmental sustainability that are part of the cooperative strategy, as reported by Nostrabadi *et al.* (2019). Some measures still need to be taken to optimize the scope of socio-environmental actions, especially in terms of the environment.

5 Final remarks

Given the current context, the history of misuse of natural resources and the lack of attention to human capital requires changes in the attitudes of people and companies. Therefore, companies are restructuring themselves to meet the needs of stakeholders without compromising future generations increasingly. In addition to existing laws to protect the environment and people, which must be complied with by organizations, thinking about actions aimed in this direction can guarantee a competitive advantage in the face of competition and business continuity. In order to adapt to this market reality, organizations seek to insert socio-environmental sustainability into their strategic plans, involving the three pillars: economic, social, and environmental.

The work seeks to answer the following research problem: What is the stakeholders' perspective on the socio-

environmental sustainability actions of a credit union agency? The objective was to verify the perspective of the interested parties on the socio-environmental sustainability actions of a cooperative credit agency located in the Vale Germânico area, RS. The results show that the responsible sector believes that actions aimed at sustainability bring continuity to the cooperative and that the cooperative's performance is of great importance in the local community. Employees understand that it is essential to maintain actions focused on this topic, as do associates.

The research investigated the socio-environmental sustainability structure of the cooperative. From the interview, questionnaires, and reading of the socio-environmental sustainability report, we noticed that the theme is already indirectly inserted in the cooperative from its foundation, since the principles of cooperativism, as per, for example, democratic management and education, training, and information are aligned with what sustainability proposes in the sense of developing people and society. In order to focus on actions that generate positive results for the cooperative and the community where it operates, a socio-environmental sustainability sector was structured at the head office located in Nova Petrópolis, which works to maintain existing actions and seek new alternatives to prosper in this sense.

The credit union's environmental and social actions were described throughout the analysis of results, based on

the responses of Interviewee 1 and the Sustainability Report. Some examples of actions are Fundo Social, which supports non-profit entities; União Faz A Vida, which is based on Projects that promote the principles of cooperativism and citizenship in schools; agricultural school scholarships for members' children; Family Succession Program, in the form of lectures to support children to remain on their parents' properties; Financial Education Program, with lectures for employees, associates, and the community; Business Consulting Program, as a way of contributing to the management of associated companies; financing solar energy as a renewable source of energy; Crescer, a program to expand the knowledge of associates about cooperativism; analysis of socio-environmental risks and opportunities of credit operations, in addition to the control of electricity with the installation of sensors in the bathrooms of the branches. There is no described and imposed action to separate waste and save paper. It is the responsibility of each branch manager to control their use of paper and separate waste.

On the motivations that lead the cooperative to invest in socio-environmental sustainability, based on the data, we found that motivation is related to the cooperative principle of achieving member and community satisfaction through "building better communities". Compliance with laws and the search for prominence in the market and new business were also mentioned.

The contribution of this research to the organization was to understand that although the associates and collaborators already know the actions of the cooperative, they can be more disseminated. Likewise, based on the analysis of socio-environmental sustainability actions, the organization can consider what can still be done to improve the relationship between the company, the community, and the environment. Therefore, the study presents empirical contributions that can inspire cooperatives from different segments

seeking to act according to sustainability principles. Based on the example of a credit cooperative, organizations can identify new perspectives to optimize their sustainability actions.

As for the study's limitations, it can be noted that as it is a single case study, it cannot be generalized as it presents the data according to the participants' perceptions. As a suggestion for future research, we recommend increasing the number of responding members to greater relevance to the results and extending the study to the other cooperative units, covering all interested parties.

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ⁱ Bancária e Bacharela em Administração pela Universidade Feevale – Novo Hamburgo – RS – Brasil.

ⁱⁱ Doutora em Administração pela Universidade do Vale do Rio dos Sinos, Brasil. Docente do Programa de Pós-Graduação em Administração da Universidade Feevale - Novo Hamburgo - RS - Brasil