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AYMAN ABDULMAJEED

Conceptual and Methodological Approaches to Reading the Realm of Cooperatives in Occupied Palestine¹

ABSTRACT In his book *Victims of Development*, Jeremy Seabrook analyses and criticises the impact of development on local populations, which brought to mind the Palestinian development conditions and prompted this important contextual and methodical study of Palestinian cooperatives as alternative methods of development that arose within the context of living under global colonial conditions. Several controversial questions came out of this study of cooperatives. The most crucial issues in the debate are whether to surrender to that reality and de facto context, or attempt to change it; to become captive to consumerism or redeem production that is based on experience and expertise, and whether to give in to individualism that undermines self-reliance or revert to productive collective action. The study also raises the critical question of whether to accept the loss of local experiences and valuable initiatives instead of moving into the path of empowerment and change. These are the actualities and alternatives for change revealed through the methodological conceptual approach of this study within a critical reading of the experience of cooperatives in a colonial context.

KEYWORDS agricultural cooperatives, roots of change, alternative methods of development, colonialism, culture of change

1. Context

The idea to frame a methodological conceptual approach to research on cooperatives in Occupied Palestine was also prompted by the increasing funding and studies published during the past 10 years (ILO 2014; Srouji 2015). Based on personal experience, I remain convinced of the need to

raise debates on cooperatives, since they have been inherent in the Palestinian culture either for resistance within the colonial context or because of the liberal policies applied by the Palestinian official institutions, albeit with a limited mandate. Past studies have shown that several pioneering Palestinian cooperatives were formed over the last few years. However, it is still necessary to answer a pressing question that surfaced in the discussions conducted during fieldwork: how can critical reading be presented as an alternative approach to social research, which would establish a cumulative knowledge of Palestinian practices and experiences towards change (resistance and steadfastness) and based on the experience of Palestinian cooperatives in the colonial context?

To respond to the question at hand, there needs to be adequate sociological research and methods that provide a critical reading of the problematic issues of cooperative thinking and work in Palestine within the existing colonial context. This paper discusses different methodologies implemented in studying cooperatives in our research project 'Palestinizing Development'², as well as interviews conducted by the Center for Development Studies (CDS) with stakeholders (local experts, Ministry of Labor) and cooperatives in the Palestinian Jordan Valley and Ramallah areas.

The fact that this study focuses on the conditions of cooperatives in the West Bank is not in any way an acceptance of the current imposed separation of the Gaza Strip from the rest of the occupied territories. It is simply a way of setting limits to the study because of the special circumstances and variables imposed by the realities of each region. It would be extremely difficult to address the numerous consequences of the settler-colonial project on Palestinians in all parts of Palestine.

2. General background

Cooperatives are independent groups of individuals who choose voluntarily to respond to their common socioeconomic and cultural needs and aspirations through joint ownership of a project that respects democracy, management and oversight. They rely on the values of group self-reliance, democracy, justice and solidarity, in addition to members' faith in integrity, honesty, social responsibility and care for others.

Cooperatives are guided by seven global principles or values that lead their work in a legislative and legal system (UN 2012). These are:

(1) Voluntary and open membership: membership is voluntary and open to all; it is based on accepting members without any discrimination.

(2) Democratic member control, where cooperatives are managed and controlled by members who participate freely in formulating policies, decision taking, and who have equal rights and obligations.

(3) Economic participation of members: all members contribute equally to governance and democratic oversight, where capital is joint property and reserve funds aim to contribute to the development of the cooperative to disseminate its effect on the entire community.

(4) Autonomy and independence: cooperatives must comply with the terms via monitoring and preservation of independence, mainly characterised by collective self-support and oversight of their members.

(5) Education, training, and information: cooperatives provide education and training for members, elected representatives, managers and employees so they can contribute effectively to the development of their cooperative.

(6) Cooperation among cooperatives: cooperative work generates collective action among all cooperative movements, working to instigate change at different local, regional or international levels.

(7) Concern for community: cooperatives work for development appropriate for their communities through policies agreed upon by their members, and implement policies based on the principles of cooperation, economic participation of members, voluntary membership and democratic governance.

These principles act as guidelines to lead the concepts of cooperative action. When applying the seven principles to the Palestinian cooperatives, it is necessary to comprehend their context to see whether they support the market discourse or contribute to excluding cooperatives from the context of the political economy in a Palestine under occupation. Furthermore, the mission of social change and involvement is a vision that leads the change without being captive to globalised principles. The assumption is that the principle of change and contribution to local development is one of consensus for involvement in cooperative collective action, rather than for the profitability of cooperatives. The value of these

principles leaves a gap that requires debate and discussion, especially in the Palestinian case.

In view of the many international changes, moving away from the revered cooperative principles is a necessity in order to give room for consideration of environmental and sustainability dimensions and implementation of environmental and social accountability. Cooperative work that is still rooted in these honoured, though abating, principles contradicts and halts flexible voluntary work in cooperative movements. This, however, does not necessarily mean the abandonment of principles and determinants guiding cooperatives, but these need to become relevant and related to local changes and realities. Clearly, both extreme flexibility and extreme devotedness affect the identity and the culture of cooperatives in terms of vision, mission and their relationship with local communities (Oczkowski et al. 2013).

2.1 Literature review on Palestinian cooperative movements³

Palestinian cooperative movements date back to the 1920s. It is generally believed that cooperatives have increased over the past 10 years, but even with the larger number, their effectiveness remains in question, as well as the issue of whether their number and size has had any developmental impact on society. The cooperatives sector in Occupied Palestine focuses on five areas of work: agricultural cooperatives, housing cooperatives, consumer cooperatives, service cooperatives and vocational cooperatives (Ministry of Labor 2012).

The final report for the year 2015 published by the Directorate General of Cooperatives in the Ministry of Labor showed that there were 872 cooperatives, 637 of which are classified as active and 235 as inactive. The highest percentage in size and investment was found in agricultural cooperatives. Cooperatives with similar work formed unions, establishing six in total, to intensify and enhance the developmental role of cooperatives. These unions are the Union of Olive Pressing, Agricultural Cooperative Union, Union of Animal Resources, Union of Housing Associations, Cooperative Union of Auditors, and Union of Cooperatives for Savings and Lending (Ministry of Labor 2016).

Local literature does not adopt a critical approach when studying cooperatives, where most were interested in providing readings for the purpose of

administrative development and financial enterprises, and did not provide a conceptual framework with a political dimension. A study on *Reforming the Cooperatives Sector in Palestine* (Srouji 2015) found a number of issues related to lack of awareness, deficiency in funding and the concept of cooperation and accountability, and disinterest in governance. It examined the executive structure and its usefulness in the work of cooperatives without examining the role of cooperatives in providing a developmental alternative for change in the colonial context. The conclusions of the International Labor Organization study (ILO 2014) were not different from the above study as relating to the evolution of cooperatives within two tracks, one related to the administrative structure and governance, and the other associated with human resources and their qualification, training and effectiveness.

These two studies did not provide a systematic and/or conceptual approach to the Palestinian context and the ability of cooperatives to move towards a developmental alternative.

Another study adopted a different approach in examining the problem of a weak cooperative movement (Hamed 2012). However, as in previous studies, it did not address the main problem of the developmental impact or provide an alternative. Rather, it fell into the same systematic narratives concerning conclusions regarding legitimacies and the vague legal gaps in the Jordanian law of the sixties. Meanwhile, another study (Makhoul 2012), presented a different perspective, wherein it examined the economic, social and developmental role of cooperatives in reducing unemployment and limiting poverty. This study also referred to new areas of work for cooperatives to extend their scope towards gender issues and youth that would make their work more effective.

It can be concluded that the literature is still deficient in that it focuses on the problems facing cooperative movements, the building of structures that contribute to governance and transparency, capacity building, and so on, without attempting to relate these issues to the Palestinian context in order to confront the colonial project both ideologically and practically.

Finally, there are two conflicting issues in the work of civil society and its involvement in supporting cooperatives. One is the approach of strategic planning and developing guidelines for administrative and financial governance, for example, the Palestinian Center for Economic and Social Development, whose vision depends on such studies and actually funds

these plans. Others, such as the Agriculture Development Association and the Union of Agricultural Work Committees, are moored in the developmental vision of the agricultural and production sectors. However, these efforts remain captive to international funding.⁴

3. Conceptual framework for discussion⁵

3.1. The framework

Several concepts must be addressed before discussing the possible framework and approach to presenting an alternative reading to the work of cooperatives in the Palestinian context. When comparing the developmental role of cooperatives, there needs to be a discussion that views development as a form of resistance and struggle with power and hegemony. The colonial project is settler colonisation with a sustained agenda to fragment, disperse and remove the Palestinians from their land. Thus, any developmental plan must consider a nationalistic approach that weaves within it the resistance to colonial domination. It should also take into account that part of the hegemonic agenda is the normalization of the colonial structure in the development process itself in the Occupied Territory (Hanieh 2013).

In the Palestinian context, for instance, the application of a food security system, which reinforces the instruments of hegemony with all its repercussions, has a serious impact on small farmers. In Palestine, there is a colonial settler market within the existing power relations that is overtaking the local institutions and their role in developing an independent economy within the Palestinian market, which reinforces and promotes dependency, thus making disengagement from the colonial conditions very difficult. The question remains whether this crisis constitutes a force for change, and whether change can be accomplished in food sovereignty and dominion over land, particularly in breaking the notion of coexistence between the two major monopolies, the agricultural capital and industrial monopolies, and small farmers within a colonial structure. This can be achieved only with a movement of resistance to promote food sovereignty and prevent monopoly through comprehensive reclamation of agricultural land; essentially restoring control of farmers over the resources of the land they are farming (Salzmann 2018).

The destructive impact of the capitalist system on self-reliance has several dimensions. It promoted dependence and reliance on machinery as a means for strengthening individuality, and ruptured solidarity and support of farmers in their own community. It essentially robbed the locals of all possible powers they had acquired from their experiences and imposed an aggressive developmental and economic system that reinforces its hegemony, by promoting the concept of a liberal free economy, for instance (Seabrook 1993).

In the 1980s and 90s, the African continent went through major transformations in cooperative work following its liberation from the grip of colonialism, which had imposed destructive policies aiming to control African agriculture and export, and more so after it abandoned subordination to governments that inherited this colonial approach. These liberated African countries moved towards a social solidarity, or more of an economic solidarity, in cooperatives that operated together based on the values of local and traditional experiences, which were adapted to fit a modern context. Many cooperatives in Africa now share common values such as democratic oversight, voluntary participation, flexibility, self-help and self-reliance, solidarity, and community ownership, all of which make people and their communities the priority instead of profit (Schwettman 2014).

Historically, cooperatives played pioneering and effective roles during times of resistance. They demonstrated this in the efficient approach used to strengthen leadership, family, and local communities. They developed different mechanisms that added new dynamics to cooperative work in a variety of new profitable projects, in a milieu of strong social will and with consideration for the most beneficial utilisation of local resources. The experience of cooperatives in Southern Philippines during the civil war is a good example in the sense that they were against destruction and isolation. Instead, they returned to revival of agricultural land, agricultural investment, and involvement in cooperative solidarity as action strategies. This strategy resulted in a boost to agricultural production and solidified relationships and social networks in the villages that were entangled in the struggle (Abag Sam/Abubakar-Sam 2013).

When reading experiences of labour cooperatives, researchers suggested that, in order not to lose their identities, they need to infuse

more of the new philosophy in their administration, one that stands on the principles of democratic participation in decision-making, which combines the elements of direct representative democracy and decision-making authority. Collective policymaking motivates members to become effective participants and part of the legislative process within the collective, instead of mere service providers to external capital. Effective participation is what drives cooperatives to sponsor common causes and goals associated with the conceptual dimension of loyalty and its impact on flexibility in cooperative endeavours. In that process, members of the cooperatives will see their role in terms of the desired benefit within the struggle and in the joint action of individual and collective interests (Puusa et al. 2016).

In the absence of several forms of freedoms as quantified by Sen (1999), the loss of freedom resulting from developmental processes and their policies may be associated with hegemony. Therefore, any conceptual shift in development must stem from the fundamentals of free institutions and emancipated human beings who are free of all forms of misery and repression. This also includes creating a community agency related to change, effectiveness and community involvement. It is true that Sen did not examine the role of the colonial state in the loss of freedom, self-determination, and control over resources; however, the forms of loss of freedom Sen addressed are the direct product of the policies of hegemony and colonisation, as addressed by some Palestinian scholars.

In the Palestinian context, the agents leading community-based change, development for liberation, and a resistance-based national economy, need to be the force that drives the empowerment of groups and individuals to return to their land and develop their productive economic capacities to produce a national economy capable of enabling the people languishing under colonisation to achieve their collective goals. As such, they can resist political and economic subordination via the development of cooperative relations (Tabar 2013).

Chambers' approach to the above is of additional analytical significance (Chambers 1983) in what he proposed regarding the exploitation of the periphery to benefit the centre and in urban development at the expense of rural areas. The dominance and exploitation of power and wealth are embodied in a typical pyramid. It begins with international exploitation

through projects that are inadequate for the local population, globalisation and colonialism, and moves into the internal levels, or urban centres, serving the interests of capitalism at the expense of agricultural and rural interests, and, at a third level, the bottom of the pyramid, the local elites and agents of the central authorities and capitalism. In the case of Palestine, many of the consequences of the domination over land within this hierarchy of authorities have been perpetrated by investment giants such as Tabo Real Estate Company and its excessive acquisition of rural areas for urban expansion, Rawabi City⁶, for instance, as well as the rentier forced urbanisation of Palestinian rural areas⁷.

The alternative, according to Haddad (2013), is to resist by rejecting the political colonial and western processes of rentierism and instead, creating a different model through development and liberation based on the concept of resistance, confronting the rule of capital, and augmenting the basis of its domination. This can only be accomplished by forming new priorities that oppose those who place great value on capitalist gains while marginalising and neglecting the poor and destitute.

Researcher Ibrahim Al-Daqqaq (1986), further deepens the discussion in his vision of the Palestinian human dimension under occupation and the necessity to revive personal effort, and invest and use it as a source of human capital in survival strategies, away from the influence of donors. Al-Daqqaq proposes a strategy of steadfastness and resistance with a developmental dimension. He describes the type of endurance that stimulates people's ability to confront the Israeli colonial pressure, promotes self-reliance (which is entrenched in universities, unions, associations and cooperatives) in order to realize development and promote endurance.

The culture of change has its roots in the first Palestinian Intifada (1987-1993), and is an advanced developed vision of cooperative and volunteer work. Reference to that intifada is certainly not for the recollection of history and lamentations over the past, but rather to read this experience as a large-scale popular uprising, which adopted a nationalistic, socio-economic and political vision. In its communiqués with the public, the Unified National Leadership of the first Intifada focused on the importance of solidarity, cooperation and promotion of steadfast volunteer and cooperative action to resist the occupation and colonial settlement expansion. The leadership of the Intifada adopted a system of popular committees, which

was an innovative idea with which to lead the Palestinian public arena. These committees made important achievements on the ground, most notably the consolidation of a spirit of cooperative and volunteer action, thus largely eliminating individualism and factionalism. This helped raise self-confidence among the Palestinian public, as they were empowered by considerations of survival and resistance (Al-Ghoul 1990).

The concept of popular committees in the first Intifada can be compared to the agricultural committees of the French agricultural cooperatives, which had a significant effect on reviving the communal and cooperative spirit among the French public. Their most important outcome was providing family-operated agricultural unions a way to exchange experiences, as well as a path to understanding the realities and the available means of development. This French grassroots structure was considerably successful at forming communal decision-making processes within coordinating social committees, which guaranteed stronger stability and public responsibility, and created a free and open milieu for farmers to deliberate on common issues in order to move forward (Herbel et al. 2015).

Cooperative work provides opportunity and space for a collective vision in learning, development and performance through the exchange of experiences, knowledge and ideas; it reinforces the concept of collaboration rooted in those experiences and knowledge – the notion of ‘collective ownership’. Literature on this subject indicates that coordinating networks make it possible for cooperatives to attain and gain knowledge as well as resources to advance the quality of production and reduce reliance on funding, in addition to promoting reciprocity in areas related to the cooperative dimensions (Borda-Rodriguez/Vicari 2014).

Cooperatives are distinguished in character in that they embrace a collective spirit and a conviction that people are the centre of all action. They promote the principles of self-help, self-reliance and autonomy by encouraging cooperative shared activities; that is, they empower members to invest effectively, giving them a voice and a sense of ownership, thus providing many opportunities for efficient and effective cooperation through the exchange of experience and in practice (Puusa et al. 2016).

Additionally, cooperatives advance the debate over their ability to cope with disturbances and challenges, of whether they are capable of bearing

these disruptions, and if they are able to espouse a strategy opposing the existing context and its limitations (Borda-Rodriguez/Vicari 2014). They grow into platforms for community debates and mobilization by generating discussions over common issues and tribulations that confront the agricultural sector, and are a communal space for self-expression when faced with governmental policies that encroach on their rights (Herbel et al. 2015).

3.1.1 *Methods and approach*

Understanding cooperative movements is in great need of research across various specialties of cooperative work. Economic theories alone cannot determine the significance and virtues of cooperative work, and cannot understand the different dimensions and scopes of cooperatives. A better approach is one that forms an adaptable multidisciplinary research methods applied in Social Science, since that would widen the range of research strategies that would result in a more thorough understanding of cooperative identities on both the epistemological and methodological levels (Szabó 2006: 17).

Researchers need to keep in mind that the learning process in cooperatives is based on trust, dialogue, listening to others, and the examination of relevant issues and how to articulate their specificities. Learning through various methods is what develops the ability to express the issues as they relate to the rights of farmers, promotes flexibility in coping with hardship, consideration of the various needs of the people, and taking individual responsibility. In Malta, for example, open and candid discussions within cooperatives were a successful and different approach to learning through sharing experiences. The will to learn and evolve is what motivates change towards an alternative economic model (Cardona 2017: 10).

This type of cooperative is a social innovation introduced in 1997 in the province of Québec, Canada, where it is known as 'solidarity cooperative'. In their study of these cooperatives in Canada, Audebrand and Malo presented them as examples of pioneering cooperative methods for promoting integration and social advancement by encouraging thinking, listening and expression in order to improve dialogue among members of different origins and ethnicities. This new form of cooperation also advances economic progress that serves the general interest rather than

self-interest. The study showed that cooperatives of that nature have given much to the people in terms of social awareness, economic collective productivity, and the willingness to be a positive influence on each other (Audebrand/Malo 2014: 23).

3.2 Problematics of the current research approach to understanding the experience of cooperatives in Occupied Palestine⁸

Here, the research question regarding which sociological methodologies can create the necessary framework for understanding the existing context of the Palestinian cooperative movement needs to be addressed. Any cognitive and conceptual debate capable of framing a national agenda to resist colonial hegemony requires an understanding of power relations to build change (Haniyeh 2013), and create a platform for stimulating community mechanisms that will generate action and actors to lead change rooted in the community (Tabar 2013). It also requires forming an alternative approach based on the notion of resistance to liberal development that rejects western colonial policies (Haddad 2013), institutes principles of self-reliance rooted in the human and institutional structure, achieving development and determination, and creating knowledge that embraces the culture of change (Al-Daqqaq 1986).

3.2.1. *Understanding the context*

Local and international research is fixed in agendas acceptable to international donor agencies that do not contradict colonial provisions. That approach goes as far as accepting theories and methodologies that neutralise all the consequences of the colonial structure, especially in the conventional use of research discourse on issues of the economy, poverty, development and vulnerable groups and areas. This perspective runs counter to the understanding of the structure of occupation and colonialism, which for decades has destroyed economic, social, political and geographic structures in a methodical, consistent and continuous manner.

Understanding the existing context by means of a critical and cognitive method begins with scientific research as an intellectual process. It carries developmental visions aimed at identifying and characterising problematics that explore social life, and can identify the political, economic and

cultural gaps and relate them to the reality in Occupied Palestine. The process of debate and juxtaposition of different theories and approaches is a necessity for reading the Palestinian arena as a process of interaction that is not theoretical projection, but a process that stems from field research as a method that interprets the vision, voice and interests of different groups.

Applying this to the debates and dialogues in the field with members and activists of cooperative movements and associations led to the following systematic understanding:

(1) *Capability versus empowerment*: the difference between capability and empowerment is that capability is characterised by a developmental vision of change wherein cooperatives are the agents of this change based on experience founded in understanding the existing reality. Empowerment, on the other hand, is driven by empowering methodologies based on training, projection, capacity-building and strategic planning as mechanisms that enhance the performance of cooperative movements. Research on cooperatives in Areas 'C' under Israeli colonial civil and security control acknowledges the role of cooperatives in those areas, indicating general signs of success. The results of dialogues and interviews showed that understanding the current cooperative experience and practices is in relating them to their productive outlook that strives for change.

(2) *Production versus consumption*: categorising cooperatives simply as owners of profitable projects for survival is a deficient view and contrary to the concept of productivity. Conversely, viewing cooperative work as programmes for the benefit of the collective will no doubt abate the notion of consumerism. Productivity is intertwined with socioeconomic scope and space. By understanding the structural dimensions of the Palestinian political economy and its resistance to free market domination and dynamics, the free market system becomes a major challenge to the values of cooperative movements and collective solidarity, voluntary action, community service, and preservation of public property. It reinforces dependency and the dominance of capitalism, and encourages individual opportunism, bribery, corruption, nepotism, the abuse of public office, and ostensibly legitimate and wasteful exorbitance. When these manifestations dominate, they increase poverty rates and lead to the decline of the middle class, compelling people to become involved in the concerns of daily life instead of struggling for the public interest and cooperative values (AbdulMajeed/Al-Sakka 2014).

This conclusion was reached through fieldwork, specifically, interviews with cooperative activists. They spoke about the value of production and its many aspects in relation to the Palestinian political economy. In their view, productivity is derived from agricultural experience with land rehabilitation and investment, and is associated with repatriation and return to the homeland, as is the case of the village of Al-Aqabah, which is being targeted for demolition by the Israeli Civil Administration.

The currently evolving variables need more thorough research and exploration in order to understand the type of charismatic leadership required to drive production in cooperative movements, and to unveil the details of their nature and relation to individual or collective human capital.

There are lessons to be learned from international cooperative experiences in productive methods that can be explored in detail. For instance, the French cooperative experience with “CUMA”, the French Farm Machinery Cooperatives movement, which is based on “collective investment” and communal use and division of property, infrastructure, and human capital, has resulted in an organic interconnection of all stages and cycles of agricultural production. CUMA is deeply rooted in the French people’s agricultural life, and is based on collective cooperation (Herbel et al. 2015).

(3) *The collective versus the individual*: cooperatives achieved noticeable success in the Toubas area because it is an agricultural area severely affected by the policies of the Israeli occupation. Their success had a collective impact on other cooperatives. Tammoun, for instance, invested in the land, in resistance of Israeli occupation policies, and reemployed 500 Palestinian labourers who used to work in Israeli settlements to work on their own land instead. Similarly, cooperatives in Al-Aqabah succeeded in retrieving the land and the village, wherein they repatriated 22 families who were displaced from the village under the pressure of the military occupation, and reintroduced and revived agricultural and livestock production, thus stimulating the job market for rural areas and neighbouring communities. This success has been associated with a collective context effectively driven by charismatic leadership, which may be contradictory to the true ‘collective and participatory’ notion, but could also be a result of the promotion of communal mobilisation through charismatic individualism, the success of which reflected on the local community (Abu Dargham al-Tammouni and al-Haj Sadik al-Akbawi).⁶

(4) *Human capital versus the project (financial capital)*: funding agencies that support and finance cooperatives are mainly interested in the monetary economic return; however, this is a shortsighted perspective that is detrimental to the human capital involved and the notion of steadfastness. These agencies are also focused on the nature of boards of directors and the leadership of cooperatives with no consideration to the collective dimension. Instead, they need to develop an understanding of the human components in the cooperative structure and its movement. That awareness would make their support a contributing element to the ability of cooperatives to form a work strategy resistant to subordination, hegemony and land seizure, as well as expanding their productive vision. The accomplishments of Tammoun and Aqabah cooperatives in fortifying steadfastness and the reclamation of land vulnerable to settler colonial policies are perfect examples of that form of success.

(5) *Freedom versus subordination and hegemony*: in Palestine, the developmental approach is based on two tracks; the first is the development of resistance and the pursuit of freedom, that is, development free of all forms of misery and repression with institutions free in function, and the forming of policies capable of framing a national agenda for resisting colonial domination. The second track is international development and dominant capitalism with declared and covert geopolitical agendas (Chambers 1983; Tabar 2013). The cooperative approach in the first track challenges dominant interests, as it leans towards productive public and collective interests (Haniyeh 2013). Cooperatives were formed with a productive vision and values deeply rooted in the Palestinian political project, namely, resistance and liberation, and these still hold today.

3.2.2. Research approaches for understanding the Palestinian context

Critical research at the Palestinian level begins by asking the problematic questions that seek to understand and explore the role played by cooperative movements in the colonial context and the Palestinian reality. Is the cooperative movement establishing a resistance and a steadfast economy, or does it co-exist with liberal economic policies and structures, and dependent on funding at the expense of the political liberation project?

Research that aims to understand cooperative movements needs to look at local experiences in order to comprehend and appreciate the extent of their struggle and the shifts they must go through to resist imposed programmes of profitable capitalist economies. This approach to research is also crucial to understanding the power of cooperative human capital that strives to change the living realities through debate and discussion, while remaining astutely aware of factors influencing volunteer cooperative work, solidarity and communal productivity within the context of the colonial reality of Palestine.

A quick analysis of various studies on cooperative movements in Palestine indicates that they were based on hypotheses and questions that made it difficult to see the point of cooperation, and on the preconceived notion that there is a problem in cooperative work in need of a cure and a solution. These studies did not seek to understand or develop human consciousness through critical reading of concrete realities and experiences. Failure is inevitable for research that begins with imposing in advance abstract determinants and hypotheses, while neglecting global experiences and achievements, and assuming that similar circumstances have the same implication in all cooperatives.

It is therefore essential to develop a spectrum of research methods built on people's humanity as a point of entry into understanding human cooperative experiences with all their indications and denotations (Orabi 2007). In other words, research methods should bring about interaction, understanding and openness to the local community, since research is a dynamic process that contributes to the understanding of human interactions, and their relations and patterns of production within the local context. Sound research methodologies begin with the precept of developing human consciousness in a systematic manner, and are capable of understanding the attitudes and visions of societal norms, without the clutter of cognitive biased projections. Diverse multiple approaches and tools are more appropriate for understanding the cooperative movements and linking them to their political, economic and social context, and incorporating the local human experience, its interrelationships and interactions into those settings (AbdulMajeed/Al-Sakka 2014).

Developing a research perspective that understands local and national contexts requires practical courses of action and a methodical approach

that is able to read cooperative development actions against the consequences of the colonial project. This new approach could work within three tracks:

First track: *the human capital*, Palestinian cooperative movements recognise that beneficial economic programmes are dependent upon the availability of projects that strengthen cooperative actions and bolster their assets. In a field study with a broader range of debate and discussion with cooperatives, which was conducted by CDS, it became apparent that a deeper reading of the experience of cooperatives in Palestine must include the main component of this movement, namely, the human component. This was achieved through a more profound understanding of human experiences within the current situation, and their interaction with the socio-economic and political context, with particular focus on the daily movement of the population in militarily isolated areas, as is the case with the village of Al-Aqabah. The human experience in cooperatives is a product of interactions and movement towards changing the realities, and carries profound meanings and symbols.

One member of the cooperative in the village of Al-Aqabah explained how the challenges for Palestinian farmers brought about by the Israeli occupation and colonial settlers have given rise to cooperative collective action for mass return to the village, which is a closed colonised military zone. This also motivated them to invest in cooperatives to reconnect them to the land and revive agricultural production.

Furthermore, the Chairman of the Tammoun cooperative spoke about the development of cooperative policies that restored human capital, which was exploited as labour in colonial settlements, and, instead, invested that human capital in the collective agricultural cooperative of Tammoun, which resulted in improvements to their structure and methods of operation.

Second track: *culture of change*, in general, cooperatives seek to achieve, in theory and practice, a culture of change that stems from an approach ingrained in principles of democracy, dialogue and participation, which are the foundation of social and economic change. As discussed by Palestinian researchers (see Tabar 2013; Haniyeh 2013), in the Palestinian context, the culture of change contains a vision for political change and resistance of hegemony and subordination. Agents of change, such as the cooperative movements, are not proxies for the capitalist system and its

normalisation policies, but rather the instrument with which new directions are formed, to lead towards justice and freedom for resistant developmental programmes.

In the process of achieving this vision, cooperatives are embroiled in different forms of struggle to deflect hegemony and create an environment and culture of change, as expressed by the members who were interviewed. These are:

(1) Forestalling colonial settlement expansion in Areas C, which are under the Israeli occupation's civil and security control, by investing in agricultural production, extending the scope of cooperative organisations, and supporting farmers' movements in those areas (Tammoun Association).

(2) Encouragement of agricultural activity and livestock farming in closed military areas, despite the risks that entails, as in the village of Al-Aqabah, as well as supporting farmers in those areas (Al-Aqabah Association).

(3) Resisting large corporate monopolies that are funded by USAID, and combatting clientalism that prevails in these monopolies (Tammoun Association).

Third Track: *productivity*, thinking of cooperative work simply as legitimate 'projects' is a deficient perspective; the purpose of cooperatives is to create a productive environment that develops the role of human capital towards production, thus combating consumerism and individualism, and establishing a vision of change instead of compliance and submission to the existing reality. An accurate perspective comes with understanding power relations, those relations that seek to dilute the reality of colonial agendas and instead consider development as a purely technical process (Haniyeh 2013). The cooperative participation approach that is open to the community makes it possible to resist dependence on and association with clientalism, and consolidates collective productivity. The tools and methods of participatory research may provide an input for researchers to deal with this reality (AbdulMajeed/Al-Sakka 2014).

4. Conclusion: Towards an approach for creating a cooperative culture tailored to the Palestinian context

In order to formulate an approach that reflects and interprets the Palestinian reality, a research methodology with an alternative vision at conceptual and methodological levels needs to be developed. That is, a research method that is able to approach the Palestinian conditions with an analytical perspective, one that understands the impact of the different factors brought about by the powers that impose pressure and influence to vitiate the capabilities and functions of the collective. Developing a vision for the future comes with a critical reading of the new and various research models, which have become the prevailing approach to Palestinian issues and predicaments. This will make it possible to understand the fragility of the Palestinian society and its vulnerability to external factors and influences predominant in the policies of colonial occupation. It will also help in identifying the internal structures and their contribution to the formation of a societal culture capable of challenging dominant powers and framing paradigms for a new course oriented towards change and resistance of hegemony and subordination.

4.1 Ethical vision of the approach

Any empirical research on cooperatives must incorporate social and national responsibility that serves the community's mission of emancipation and liberation by addressing the various dimensions of the political, economic and social questions. This can only be achieved with an approach that recognises the reality and needs of society, as well as those of cooperative organisations, and their relevance to the interest of the public, away from preconceived cognitive projections that contort perception, generate prejudices, misdirect the targeted society, and only serve the personal interest and goals of the researcher.

Truly ethical research is essentially a process of learning from community experiences and knowledge in the field, with implicit awareness of the notion of social and national responsibility. A central issue researchers need to understand is that community participation in the research is voluntary, and that the respondents have the right to cease participating whenever they wish to do so. With that, giving ample opportunity for

feedback and analysis with the community once basic conclusions are reached becomes crucial in that it allows the respondents to express their views on the results and concepts derived from their experiences. This feedback gives researchers a deeper understanding of the community's views on the issues and questions that had emerged. This participatory approach prevents manipulation or misunderstanding of positions and arguments that may arise during the field research, and prevents distortion of things said without confirming the context and content. Such an approach does not throw the respondents into unrealistic future hopes and directions, which deceive the public and undermine their interests, but rather, reassures them that the sole purpose of the research is serving their own interests.

Other factors could inhibit the participation of respondents. An illustration of this came in a field experience in a study the CDS was conducting in one community. Many members of the cooperative refused to comment during the focus groups, but when individually interviewed, they felt more comfortable and free of dominating power relations within the cooperatives. Their viewpoints led to the discussion of new paths towards ethical methods that understand the balance of power and provide a deeper understanding of the cooperative experience.

In Toubas, however, the process of feedback was quite successful. Members of the cooperative clearly recognised the importance of the open and participatory dialogues and debates in which they engaged. They appreciated the methods of discussion and the participatory approach, and the subsequent connection they made with the Birzeit University research team. They were able to grasp the underlying ethical and cognitive value of that approach, which respects the local experience and knowledge. They acknowledged that the objective of the study is development of local cooperative work.

In the final analysis, researchers must have the conviction that field experience will increase their knowledge and widen their horizons. It is thus important to document the exact findings of the study, and accurately reflect the views of the respondents when conducting the analysis (Abdul-Majeed/Al-Sakka 2014).

4.2 Participatory qualitative approach

Understanding the reality begins by adapting research methodologies and applying various participatory tools to interact with people and their activities in collaborative work. This approach also takes into account the exposure of human capital and its environment to external determinants associated with colonisation, as in the case in Palestine. A participatory approach to research necessarily requires understanding societal concepts and implications based on qualitative and quantitative study, and conducting thorough analytical critical examinations without becoming ensnared in the digital flood and massive statistical information that are sometimes misleading. Diagnosing the Palestinian situation by drowning in numbers without a systematic immersion into local communities leads to alienated disengaged research. Reading the experiences of the Palestinians under occupation and colonisation through an interactive methodology based on participation and partnership is a process that affirms the researcher's engagement in the reality of the subjects. It also provides them with an opportunity to articulate and express their views on their reality and their experiences with the different forces and influences, which is an effective point of entry to understanding the entire context (AbdulMajeed/Al-Sakka 2014).

Dialogue with cooperative activists for dialogue's sake without a critical understanding of their experiences is pointless. The CDS research experience and the participatory dialogue conducted in the village of Al-Aqabah were evidently effective. The chairperson of Al-Aqabah Cooperative Sami Sadeq's statement expressed the general reaction of the community; he said, "The dialogues with the Birzeit University team were not for exploitive journalistic purposes or a mere social visit, but were clearly a process that respects our reality and experiences."

Moreover, the open and participatory dialogues with collectives in Al-Aqabah, Toubas and Tammoun generated a deeper understanding of the internal relations within cooperatives. The approach was a clear reflection of a method that brings about an accurate reading of the mechanisms of internal relations within these cooperatives.

4.3 Framing concepts *versus* projection

Researchers need to be cognizant of theories developed within societal case studies that are very different from the Palestinian reality. These studies were attempts to analyse developing countries that were liberated from colonisation, and which are undergoing post-colonial adaptation. Relying on theories and analytical frameworks alien to the Palestinian context will only result in a narrow or even faulty view of the reality. A sensible study of the Palestinian reality begins with an approach attentive to the shared experiences and knowledge of the communities, and seeks to understand them within their context in Palestinian society. This, however, does not mean that these theories should be completely discarded, but rather that the existing context should be understood far from the constraints and rigidity of those theories, or that the assumptions of these theories be tried, adapted and / or brought into the Palestinian context.

Liberation from prejudices and stereotypes means gaining the ability to delve into socially and intellectually problematic issues, to understand them ideologically, and to free them of the deception of preconceptions imposed on the study. Developing conceptual frameworks that are relevant to the social foundation rather than the grassroots/community base, will make it possible to interact with society and allows for a thorough interpretation and analysis, especially when tools of dialogue and participatory interaction are employed in the process (Birks/Mills 2015).

In the dialogues with the Tammoun and Toubas associations, it emerged that this approach brought a profound understanding to the study. This was accomplished through discussions with various clusters and levels of individuals involved in local cooperative work, and incorporating the vision of cooperative members, taking into account the socio-economic determinants of households in terms of gender and age indicators, experience, and geopolitical factors.

4.4 Heading towards the future

For the purpose understanding the past and looking towards the future, many issues were brought in for cognitive debate. Some addressed the question of research and its problematic and local knowledge characteristics, in addition to the prevailing traditional inadequate methods of

analysis that conclude with relief solutions (dependence), which ignore the context. That was compared to a more suitable approach that begins with stated questions for the problematics that lead to understanding cooperative movements as agents of struggle for change within the dynamics of power and privilege in Palestine.

What emerged here is a conviction that the participatory approach, designed to create debate and discussion, focusing on critical knowledge through practical methods, is the most adequate approach for paving the road to understanding and dealing with the Palestinian situation. It is so, specifically because it is based on community debate and dialogue, from which arises an objective and realistic analysis of effective development actors in the context of the forcibly colonised and globalised Palestinian circumstances. With the participatory approach, it becomes possible to recognise the roles and tools of cooperatives as conduits for change, based on real life experiences and knowledge of the local reality, thus producing alternative models that systematically and cognitively address personal and moral responsibility.

The participatory approach to research is a dynamic process for producing cognitive understanding and raising social awareness. This awareness is then framed in a cognitive political process that understands the sources of strength in Palestinian society in their confrontation and dismantling of the system of colonialism and its discourse. Exploring common experiential denominators is not a process for identifying congruent discourse, but rather, a thorough examination of all the existing cooperative experiences leading to desired change in the Palestinian situation.

To close, the statements made by members of the cooperative movement in the village of Al-Aqabah about their view of the participatory cognitive approach that takes into consideration their experiences and knowledge, well express the general Palestinian vision of the future: It is vital to focus on the agricultural work of cooperatives for what it achieves in defying and resisting the Israeli occupation and its determination to destroy the land and wipe out farms. Cooperatives have given the people a space to redeem their dignity through cooperative agricultural projects such as the dairy factory and the herbal medicine factory. These projects have brought into the people's lives a deep sense of solidarity and collec-

tive productivity: “We the people of Al-Aqabah have dignity and pride because of our leadership and a cooperative movement that does not allow any donor or the occupation to impose their agenda on our community.”

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- 1 The researcher referred to part of the literature review conducted for his Ph.D. research in Social Sciences at the University of Lebanon on experience-based development.
- 2 Funded by the Austrian Commission for Development Research at the OeAD-GmbH (KEF), our empirically based research project aimed at analysing potentials as well as limits of existing agricultural cooperatives in the Tammoun area in the West Bank. For further information on the project, visit KEF’s website: <http://2016.kef-research.41n.eu/en/database/>
- 3 Brief summary; for detailed data, visit the webpage of the Ministry of Labor: www.mol.pna.ps
- 4 Interviews with Fayad Fayad, Beilen Cooperative and Rana Abed Raboh (2015).
- 5 The critical and methodological framework relied on interviews held by CDS in 2005.
- 6 Rawabi is a new Palestinian city, under construction since 2010. It is built on agricultural land in implementation of neoliberal policies that do not contradict the colonial condition.
- 7 Interviews of cooperative activists in the Governorate of Toubas.
- 8 This part relies mainly on interviews and focus groups with cooperatives and activists in the cooperative movement.
- 9 Interviews with cooperatives in Tamoun and Toubas.

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ABSTRACT In seinem Buch Victims of Development (1993) analysiert und kritisiert Jeremy Seabrook die Auswirkungen von Entwicklung auf lokale Bevölkerungen, was an die palästinensischen Bedingungen von Entwicklung denken lässt und zu diesem wichtigen kontextuellen und methodischen Beitrag über palästinensische Kooperativen als alternative Entwicklungsmethoden führte, die wiederum innerhalb globaler kolonialer Bedingungen entstanden sind. Verschiedene kontroverse Fragen kristallisierten sich in der Untersuchung von Kooperativen in Palästina heraus. Die entscheidenden waren: Inwieweit kapitulieren die Kooperativen vor der Realität, oder versuchen sie, diese zu verändern? Bleiben sie selbst in Konsumvorstellungen gefangen oder entwickeln sie eine Produktionsweise, die auf Erfahrung und Expertise basiert? Unterliegen diese Kooperativen also auch einem Individualismus, der die Bedeutung von Selbst- und Eigenständigkeit untergräbt, oder kehren sie zu einem gemeinsamen produktiven Vorgehen zurück? Außerdem beschäftigt sich der Beitrag mit der Frage, inwiefern Kooperativen einen Weg in Richtung Empowerment und Veränderung einschlagen. Durch eine kritische Lesart der Erfahrungen von Kooperativen in einem kolonialen Kontext werden die Realitäten ebendieser sowie Alternativen für Veränderung herausgearbeitet.

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