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Mutual Organizations, Mutual Societies



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Synonyms

[Mutuals](#)

Definition

According to a very broad definition of the European Commission, mutual organizations/societies “are voluntary groups of persons (natural or legal) whose purpose is primarily to meet the needs of their members rather than achieve a return on investment.” This broad definition includes self-help groups, friendly societies, cooperatives, mutual insurance companies, mutual benefit societies, credit unions, building societies, savings and loans associations, micro-credit, burial associations, Freemasons... (European Commission 2003). Hereafter, it is a more restricted definition that is used, relying on principles shared by most mutuals in Europe, the region where they are the most widespread. However, some international examples put European mutual societies in perspective.

The core organizations examined here will be mutual insurance companies and mutual benefit societies. In that sense, mutual societies are insurance companies run by their members for protecting them against property, personal and social risks on a voluntary and noncompulsory basis. Mutual insurance companies deal with property and life risks while mutual benefit societies protect their members against social risks, mainly illness, disability, and old age.

Introduction

Mutual organizations or mutual societies, often designated as mutuals, exist everywhere in the world, in developing as well as in industrialized countries, in a more or less institutionalized form. In a developing country, some mutual organizations appear as voluntary associations for gathering and pooling money to fund marriages, funerals, or business start-ups for one or several members (tontines or roscas). Other mutuals pool voluntary work to afford water supplies or build roads in rural areas (development self-help associations). Mutual aid is a voluntary reciprocal exchange of resources and services for mutual benefit. Mutual aid, as opposed to charity, does not connote moral superiority of the giver over the receiver.

In a developed country, mutual societies are more and more businesses; they operate in the same markets as corporations and compete with

them. They are formed on a voluntary basis to provide aid, benefits, insurance, credit, or other services either to their members or to a larger population. In many countries, mutual organizations have a very long history, as recounted hereafter.

Operating on the same markets as corporations, mutual societies are facing global competition challenging their historical values. As forerunners or complements to the social security schemes, they have to find innovative responses to new social needs and to the crisis of the welfare state. These key issues and new challenges are at the root of the dynamics of mutual organizations.

If mutual societies are insurance companies run by their members for protecting them against property, personal and social risks, this definition has to be specified by a set of principles shared by the bulk of mutual organizations and inherited of historical experience. The majority of these principles are also adopted by other social economy organizations:

- *Absence of shares*: Mutuals are a grouping of persons (physical or legal), the members, and not a pooling of funds as in the case of corporations. Unlike cooperatives, whose capital is represented by shares, the funds of mutuals are owned and managed jointly and indivisibly. A mutual has no external shareholders to pay by dividends and does not usually seek to maximize profits. Mutual organizations exist for the members to benefit from the services they provide; their main resource is the fees or premiums paid by their members/owners.
- *Free membership*: This means free entry and free exit for everyone who fulfills the conditions laid down in the bylaws and abides by mutualism principles. According to these conditions, the mutual can be “open” to the population at large, such as health mutuals in Belgium or “closed,” reserved to a geographical area, an industry, or an occupation. In the case of compulsory insurance, health insurance, or car insurance, for example, the choice of the insurer has to be free.
- *Solidarity among members*: A historical principle rooted in the nineteenth-century workers’

movement and the ideology of the current solidarity. Currently, that means a joint liability, a cross-subsidization between good risks and bad risks in mutual benefit society, and no discrimination among members according to their age or risk.

- *Democratic governance*: Conveyed by the principle “one person, one vote” in opposition with the rule “one share, one vote” which is symbolic of corporate governance. Board members are volunteers, unlike the practice of director fees in corporations.
- *Independence*: Mutuals are private and independent organizations, neither controlled by government representatives nor funded by public subsidies. In the absence of shares, a mutual cannot be subject to a takeover bid by a standard business.
- *Limited profit sharing*: The profit of a mutual can be partly shared among the owners/members, usually as discounted premiums or rebates. The main part of the profit is reinvested in order to improve the services offered to members, to finance the development of the business, or to increase their own funds. Profit sharing has to be limited because it is not the aim of the organization. The organization’s purpose is to meet the interests of its members and sometimes of the community at large and also to empower the members. The fact that profit sharing is authorized in mutual societies prevents most of them from being included in the nonprofit sector since they are not strictly nonprofit distributing (Salamon and Anheier 1997). However, they belong to the larger social economy (UN 2018).

These principles often referred to as mutualism values are inherited from a deeply rooted historical background.

Historical Background

Mutual benefit societies date back to the most ancient times, while mutual insurance companies are more recent. Some precursory mutual

organizations could be found in Ancient Egypt (mutual assistance among stone cutters) or in the Roman Empire (the same among bricklayers). However, mutual benefit societies are mainly descendants of the oldest part of the European nonprofit sector: They appeared in the Middle Ages as charitable brotherhoods (continental Europe) or friendly societies (United Kingdom). Brotherhoods were fraternal societies in urban areas linked to the guilds and therefore reserved to the same craft, business, or trade; they helped the needy members of the guild in the case of illness of their families or the widow and the orphan in the case of death of the breadwinner. Friendly societies fulfilled the same purposes, but they were independent of the guilds and therefore more open than brotherhoods. The corporatist system on which the guilds and brotherhoods relied became weaker but survived with the rise of the free market and modern industry in most European countries. In France, the 1789 Revolution suppressed both guilds and their social subsidiaries, the brotherhoods (Archambault 1997; Dreyfus 1993).

Nevertheless, mutual benefit societies flourished during the nineteenth century in Europe, when the industrial revolution and rural depopulation pauperized the working class and broke the traditional solidarity of the family or the village. They were inspired by ideological currents such as utopist socialism (Owen, Proudhon), the Fabian movement, or solidarism (Bourgeois, Durkheim). Some of these mutuals were linked with the emerging labor unions, and others were more middle-class oriented. Depending on the country, the period, and the degree of recognition of the labor movement, they were either repressed or encouraged by the state (Toucas-Truyen 1995).

Whatever their form, mutual benefit societies were the forerunner of the welfare states. Mutual societies detected first the main social risks (sickness, disability, and old age) that were covered later by a public social insurance scheme in Continental European countries and by a national health service and pension funds in Anglo-Saxon and Nordic countries. During the twentieth century, modern welfare states challenged mutual

benefit societies, forced to become either complements or agents of the compulsory social security schemes. However, most of them keep their vanguard function (Esping-Andersen 1999).

The forerunners of mutual insurance companies are more recent. They can be found in the second part of the nineteenth century when the progress of probabilistic mathematics transformed insurance into a modern industry. Farmers pooled their savings to protect themselves against the risks of their property, bad weather, and fires mainly, on a mutual basis. Other mutual insurance companies for retailers and craftsmen followed, in competition with insurance corporations, but the dissemination of mutual insurance among the salaried population is more recent; it was in many countries a by-product of the post WWII consumption society, especially with the compulsory insurance against car accidents and other damage to real estate property (Toucas-Truyen 1995).

From the second part of the nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century, mutual forms of banking appeared in Europe either as mutual societies or cooperatives to pool the savings and afford credit to the part of the population who had no access to commercial banks because of their lack of guarantee. The Raiffeisen banks in Germany are the most emblematical, the savings and loans associations or the savings banks the most widespread.

Key Issues

Competition

Mutual insurance companies compete with investor-driven businesses. In this competition, they have advantages and disadvantages. Some features can be put on the asset side:

- The mutuals rely on trust, a winning card in an industry with high information asymmetry as Hansmann shows it: The insurer knows more than the client on the probability of the risk, but the client knows more on the quality of the car or dwelling insured. Trust in mutual insurance companies is manifested by a lower discrimination among members than in the competing

businesses and by the education of their members to prevent the risks and not to cheat in their accident claims.

- They have a better quality-price ratio than their competitors due to their nearly nonprofit status, to their policy of rebates, to the fact that they have no or few brokers, and also to the homogeneity of their members in the case of professional mutuals.
- They have a high financial solidity, because their investments are less risky and more often ethical than those of their competitors and also because they are not subject to takeover bids. In the periods of stock exchange crisis, they act as stabilizing agents and shock absorbers. This financial stability incites mutual insurance companies to have long-term objectives (Boned 2008).

But the shortcomings of the mutual status exist also:

- The mutual insurance companies have limited access to external capital from the financial markets while the restricted voting rights may also discourage external investors. This limited access to capital markets is an obstacle to life insurance, an activity that cannot be run with a pay-as-you-go system as the property insurance. In the latter, the premiums are devoted to the members who had a loss on an annual basis.
- The size of some of the large mutual insurance societies is likely to distance members from the decision-making center. In the smaller ones, the application of democratic governance may lead to delays in the decision-making process. Recently, the application to mutual insurance companies of the European directives on insurance incited them to merge to attain a critical size on the insurance market.

These disadvantages facing competition led in many Anglo-Saxon countries to a demutualization trend.

Demutualization

In the United Kingdom, the demutualization of the building societies was the beginning of a wave of demutualization as part of the Thatcher government's deregulation trend. The building societies first arose in the nineteenth century from working men's mutual savings groups: By pooling their savings, members could buy or build their own homes. With the development of financial services, building societies offered mortgage loans like standard banks did. In order to diversify their services to keep up with banks and other financial institutions in the commercial world, the old societies needed to expand. To do that, they had to raise capital, a difficult operation with a mutual form because they had no access to equity markets. In 1986, the building societies became joint stock societies, the British form of corporations, and therefore they floated on the stock exchange. The capital and reserve funds were distributed among members who became shareholders. Of course, sharing the collective property of these mutual organizations accumulated by many generations was a windfall gain for the present-day members who received each about \$1000. But the rising of costs and prices which followed the demutualization was an unexpected consequence for consumers, and the bankruptcy of Northern Rock, a former building society, during the sub-prime crisis was also a disillusion. Despite the demutualization, there are still more than 10,000 mutual societies in the UK today.

A major demutualization wave took place in the USA in the 1980s and again in the late 1990s according to the same line, and a smaller one in Australia. This demutualization trend affected savings and loans associations in the USA and building societies in Australia. Demutualization was less pronounced in continental Europe, and it is forbidden by law in some countries such as France, Luxemburg, and Ireland. In those countries who insist on the intergenerational nature of solidarity, the registered capital and the reserve funds cannot be shared among the members/owners if the organization disappears. In this case, the property of the organization has to be transferred to another mutual or social economy organization or to the state.

Mutual Benefit Societies in Changing Welfare States

Mutual benefit societies compete with complementary health insurance provided by standard insurance companies. In this competition of money transfers or reimbursements, they keep or extend their market shares in most countries as they have a better quality-cost ratio. Health mutuals rely on principles which differ from those of commercial insurance companies: Fees are often paid according to the member's income and not according to its personal risk or their age. Bad risks are never rejected, there is no rate and benefit discrimination among members, and therefore a cross-subsidization between bad and good risks and the rich and poor occurs.

However, mutual benefit societies are much more challenged by the retrenchment or change of the public welfare states when the demand for social services increases. Two long-term trends, the aging of the population and the reduction of care self-service within households due to the growth of female employment, increase the demand for day care, homecare, and nursing homes. Facing what Esping-Andersen called the "family failure" of care services, during the last decades, mutual benefit societies in some European countries provided social services or facilities to children, the disabled, and the frail elderly, with high quality standards. In the social homecare service provision, they compete with standard businesses and also with nonprofit organizations. These personal services are financed partly by the household itself, partly by the central and local governments or social security, and partly by the employers. Nordic and Anglo-

Saxon countries are the forerunners in this new welfare mix spreading rapidly elsewhere.

International Perspectives

Europe

Rooted in this long and diverse historical background, the European mutual organizations/societies are today important providers of insurance and health services. Mutual insurance companies hold a very significant share of the insurance market: 50% of car and real estate insurance in France and 22% of the whole insurance industry in Germany, but they are rare in Italy and Greece. Their market share in life insurance and pension funds is smaller, but it is growing. Recently, some cooperative banks began to deliver insurance products as well; this is why recent statistics include them with mutuals (Table 1).

France (EUR 878 billion) and Germany (EUR 718 billion) are the largest markets in terms of assets held by mutual insurers, but smaller countries have also large assets in 2016, especially Denmark (EUR 258 billion) and Sweden (EUR 238 billion).

There are mutual benefit societies in every European country, and all of them provide health insurance and other services. They are for historical reasons tightly linked to social security schemes, but their role differs according to the form of the health protection: social insurance, funded by employers and employees' contributions, in most continental and eastern countries (Bismarckian scheme) or national health services financed by tax in Anglo-Saxon, Nordic, and some Mediterranean countries (Beveridgian

Mutual Organizations, Mutual Societies, Table 1 Mutual and cooperative insurance sector in Europe and the EU, 2016

	Europe (36 countries)	EU (28 member states)
Premium income (€ billion)	429	410
Insurance market share	31.5%	32.6%
Total assets (€ billion)	2,020	–
People employed	461,000	439,000
Members/policy holders	425,000,000	417,000,000

AMICE (2020)

scheme) (Esping-Andersen 1999). According to these various social protection schemes, mutual benefit societies either run the compulsory health insurance (Germany, Belgium, Netherlands, Czech Republic, and Slovakia) or provide a complementary sickness or old age insurance (France, Switzerland, Luxembourg, Spain, and Portugal) or alternatives to the national health system, such as quicker health care or higher pensions (UK and Nordic countries). Mutual benefit societies cover a larger part of the population in the Bismarckian than in the Beveridgean countries, as shown in Table 2.

However, in Europe, mutual organizations do not extend to other industries than their historical ones: property, personal, and social insurance or credit. That is why they are the smaller part of social economy organizations. Table 3 gives an order of magnitude of the respective share of cooperatives, mutuals, and nonprofit organizations in the social economy. Even if these data are not strictly comparable because they are not based on a common methodology, employment in mutual organizations is only about 3% of the total employment in social economy organizations, compared to 30.8% in cooperatives and 66.2% in nonprofit organizations.

Belgium, Croatia, Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, Slovakia, Sweden, and UK, mainly corporatist or postcommunist countries, are over this 3% average.

Other International Perspectives

In the United States, many insurance companies were initially mutual insurance, and some corporations mutualized, their ownership passing to their policy holders. But as already noted,

the reverse trend of demutualization occurred in the 1980s. Nowadays, even if their name includes the term mutual, all insurance companies are joint stock owned. Many savings and loan associations were also mutual companies, owned by their depositors, but most of them are now under stock ownership. In the same way, some health insurance companies, formerly created as nonprofit organizations, such as Blue Cross and Blue Shield, became more standard businesses under the pressure of competition.

Nowadays, in many developing countries, especially in Latin America, Asia, and Africa, where public social insurance does not exist or is at the very beginning, mutual organizations play the same role as the mutual benefit societies played in the European countries in the nineteenth century. As in Europe formerly, these mutuals are created by and for the most organized and educated part of the population. The risks covered are illness, death, and accident, and also mutual help in case of social events such as marriages and funerals, proportionally much more expensive than in developed countries. Most of these mutual organizations were created during the last three decades, and they are a source of empowerment for the population. For example, the Fandene mutuals in Senegal are controlled by elected countrymen of the same village; in Bolivia, Proyecto de Salud provides free health care in exchange for volunteer work to build health facilities; in the Philippines, Mother and Child Care relies on members fees but acts also as a lobby to obtain low prices from multinational drug companies. When public health insurance or a health service is created, mutual organizations shift to other risks such as old age.

Mutual Organizations, Mutual Societies, Table 2 Distribution of the population covered by a mutual benefit society in Europe

Less than 20% of total population	20–40% of total population	40–60% of total population	60–80% of total population	80–100% of total population
Italy	Hungary	Slovakia	France	Germany
Greece	Denmark	Slovenia	Czech Republic	Netherlands
Spain	Sweden	Ireland	Luxembourg	Belgium
United Kingdom	Finland			Switzerland
Portugal				

Source: AIM (2008)

Mutual Organizations, Mutual Societies, Table 3 Employment in mutual societies and other social economy organizations, EU 28

Country	Cooperatives	Mutual societies	Associations and foundations	Total social economy
Austria	70,474	1,576	236,000	308,050
Belgium	23,904	17,211	362,806	403,921
Bulgaria	53,841	1,169	27,040	82,050
Croatia	2,744	2,133	10,981	15,848
Cyprus	3,078	n.a.	3,906	6,984
Czech Republic	50,210	5,368	107,243	162,921
Denmark	49,552	4,328	105,081	158,961
Estonia	9,850	186	28,000	38,036
Finland	93,511	6,594	82,000	38,036
France	208,532	136,723	1,927,557	2,372,812
Germany	860,000	102,119	1,673,861	2,635,980
Greece	14,983	1,533	101,000	117,516
Hungary	85,682	6,948	142,117	234,747
Ireland	39,935	455	54,757	95,147
Italy	1,267,603	20,531	635,611	1,923,745
Latvia	440	373	18,528	19,341
Lithuania	7,000	332	n.a.	7,332
Luxembourg	2,941	400	21,998	25,345
Malta	768	209	1,427	2,404
Netherlands	126,797	2,860	669,121	798,778
Poland	235,200	1,900	128,000	365,000
Portugal	24,316	4,896	186,751	215,963
Romania	31,573	5,038	99,774	136,385
Slovakia	23,799	2,212	25,000	51,611
Slovénia	3,059	319	7,332	10,710
Spain	528,000	2,360	828,041	1,358,401
Sweden	57,516	13,908	124,408	195,832
United Kingdom	222,785	65,925	1,406,000	1,694,710
TOTAL EU28	4,198,193	407,602	9,015,740	13,621,535

Chaves and Monzon (2019)

Mutual organizations such as the tontines are also widespread in developing countries. Tontines pool the savings among a small group of members or a village; a random winner every year takes all the money to realize a small business; the tontine's life ends when every member has got once the pooled savings. These financial mutuals look like the building societies of the earliest times (Defourny et al. 1999).

Future Directions

European Mutual Societies at the Crossroads

Mutual societies are driven by two logics, insurance and solidarity; the former dominates in mutual insurance companies and the latter in mutual benefit societies. This fragile equilibrium is nowadays challenged by the European Commission's ambiguous guidelines. On the one hand, the European Commission acknowledges the public benefit role of mutual societies and other social economy organizations. On the other hand, the insurance directives and the Solvency 2 guidelines

consider them as insurance corporations and drive them to a kind of standardization.

Another challenge is due to the merging trend in mutuals, partly a consequence of European guidelines and the implementation of Solvency 2 finally in 2016. In France, for instance, mutuals numbered 5,800 in 1990 and only 400 in 2018. This horizontal integration increases the size of mutual societies with the result of more difficult democratic governance with elected representatives of the owners/members and a less direct relationship with the members and the territory. The difference made by mutuals has been reduced by the competition with standard businesses that skim their good risks and use personal big data to choose their policy holders. Many mutuals created also corporate subsidiaries, another way of trivialization or institutional isomorphism (Boned 2008).

Mutual Societies Fit Postindustrial Societies

Mutual societies are prototypes of social enterprises, an emerging form of enterprise. In post-industrial societies, personal services are difficult to standardize and offer a wide range of quality and asymmetric information. These personal services are provided by mutual benefit societies as well as nonprofit organizations with a better quality-cost ratio than their shareholder-driven counterparts. They can help to give equitable access to health care and a solidarity-based health coverage. Mutual insurance companies have a long-term orientation that provides stability to the financial sector.

A democratic management fits the well-educated youth who dislike the authoritarianism of standard firms and advocate for the social responsibility of enterprise. A mutual form fits also high technology services at least at their very beginning, when partners are supposedly equal: the wiki movement, for example. A mutual could also run pension funds and retirement savings with a better financial solidity and a more ethical choice of investments than for-profit pension funds. So in the future, preindustrial forms of mutual organizations in developing countries could coexist with postindustrial forms, well adapted to the knowledge economy.

In addition, the large assets of mutual insurance societies could be used partly to invest in ecological transition. While banking and insurance industries are getting closer, mutuals are no doubt important partners to build a more inclusive economy (Noya and Clarence 2007).

Cross-References

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Further Viewing

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UZcdtHjhSJs>