

# SUCCESS OF COOPERATIVE AND PARTICIPATORY SUPERMARKETS IMPLEMENTED IN ITALY

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In Italy, too, the strategy of creating cooperative and participatory supermarkets has been highly successful and is gradually developing in many cities, from the north to the south of the country.

These cooperative and participatory supermarkets are inspired by the experience and success of the [Park Slope Food Coop](#), the first participatory supermarket created in the 1970s in New York by a cooperative that involved 17,000 members. These innovative supermarkets have spread widely in France, Spain, and other European cities. In Italy, [the first participatory supermarket, the Emporio di Comunità Camilla](#), opened in Bologna in February 2019, and since then, the experiences have multiplied, reaching the current number of five structures operating throughout the country.

Since 2019, the following participatory supermarkets have been established:

- Camilla. Emporio di Comunità in Bologna. [Web](#)
- Edera. Emporio di Comunità in Trento. [Web](#)
- Alveare. Emporio di Comunità in Conegliano Veneto. [Web](#)
- OltreFood Coop in Parma. [Facebook](#)
- Stadera. Spazio Mercato Cooperativo in Ravenna. [Web](#)

Additionally, the following six cooperatives are actively working to implement their Participatory Supermarkets: Eufemia. Emporio di Comunità in Milano. [Web](#); Cooperativa di Comunità Ginko in Merano. [Instagram](#); Il Cavolo Equo emporio di Comunità in Reggio Emilia. [Facebook](#); Birà Food Coop. Supermercato collaborativo in Perugia. [Web](#). Emporio di Comunità Cooperativa Laurentina KM 10 in Roma. [Web](#); Mesa Noa. Emporio in Cagliari. [Web](#).

In many cases, in Italy, the participatory supermarkets represent a more complex organizational evolution of the Solidarity Purchasing Groups (GAS) experience. For three decades, more than 1,000 GAS have involved over 7 million people in practices that bring together local producers and consumers through direct purchasing methods, without the intermediation of commercial structures. The experience of GAS, based on spontaneous local associations of diverse social backgrounds, has already demonstrated that a different distribution of agricultural products is possible, as well as a new agriculture capable of building an alliance between producers and consumers based on ecological choices, land protection, the desire to maintain soil fertility and avoid pesticides, and the desire to pay agricultural producers a fair price. Participatory supermarkets allow these experiences to be expanded and consolidated, building a permanent structure that can handle the distribution of all products used in households, adopting the same ecological values and operating principles.



A cooperative and participatory supermarket is a store where members are not only customers, but also owners and volunteer workers. The mechanism is simple and relies on reducing staff costs, the most significant for any business. These supermarkets require members to commit to working for free for a limited number of hours, generally three per month. Increasing the number of members thus becomes a structural objective for every cooperative supermarket, to expand the range of services while keeping product costs low. The tasks performed by members are essential in a supermarket: managing the cash register, stocking shelves, managing the warehouse, handling purchasing and accounting. In exchange for this contribution and the cooperative membership fee, members are entitled to shop at cost prices, with a minimal markup, which serves to cover the supermarket's fixed operating costs, such as rent and utilities.

This system guarantees significant savings and significantly reduces product prices compared to those charged by traditional retailers. However, the benefits of cooperative supermarkets are not only financial, as they adopt collectively defined choices made by the cooperative, which reflect the most advanced strategies for ensuring sustainability: they favor direct purchasing from small local producers, constituting a powerful mechanism for supporting the local economy; they favor the offering of organic products, orienting agricultural production toward agroecology; and they favor the sale of loose products, avoiding the use of packaging and reducing the use of plastic.

[Cooperative supermarkets represent a model that challenges large-scale retail trade.](#) In participatory cooperative supermarkets, members are simultaneously owners, customers, and volunteers, contributing a certain number of hours of voluntary service each month. This approach allows for cutting operating costs and offering quality products at affordable prices, favoring small, local producers, sustainable practices, and transparency.

In most cases, supermarkets are established as cooperatives, with the primary objective of ensuring maximum economic benefit for their members by providing them with goods and services at more favorable terms than market rates. As owners, members have decision-making power and the members' assembly is the sovereign body and decides on strategic matters. The assembly or its specialized working groups decide which new producers to include and what prices to agree with them; whether to invest in new equipment or expand services. This ensures good transparency, in all aspects, both managerial and financial. The duties of each member are:

- pay their membership fee, which becomes part of the share capital;
- mandatory work, which is the foundation of the model, and each member must complete their monthly service. Shift management is handled using dedicated management software, which allows members to flexibly book and exchange their schedules;
- a variety of tasks, accessible to all. New members are often provided with initial training to familiarize them with the entire division of labor.

In a cooperative supermarket, it is not an anonymous consumer who decides on the products. Members actively participate in selecting producers, creating a generally short supply chain based on trust and direct relationships. This prioritizes quality, local provenance of products and sustainable farming methods. Small farms and artisan workshops are often chosen, enhancing the local economy.

Furthermore, participatory cooperative supermarkets generally favor operational choices that are attentive to the following aspects which significantly reduce the environmental impact of the structure:



- reducing unsold goods. By orienting purchasing to the actual needs of their members, they avoid choices that create unmanageable surplus. Unsold food waste is dramatically reduced, by even over 90%;
- favoring loose products. They typically choose legumes, grains, detergents, and similar loose products, asking members to bring their own reusable containers to the store when shopping;
- reducing plastic and cardboard packaging. It is estimated that the reduction is up to 70%, compared to a traditional store of a similar size.

These cooperative participatory supermarkets don't just offer a financial advantage through more affordable prices. Their impact goes beyond the grocery shopping experience. They often collaborate with other projects of the territory, such as urban gardens, social enterprises, and educational projects in schools. By organizing cultural and social initiatives, workshops, events, and discussions on sustainability topics, they become social and cultural hubs in the area. Their model encourages conscious consumption and ethical choices, reducing waste, shortening supply chains, and creating value for the local economy.

### To know more

[First Self-managed Supermarket Camilla](#)

[FoodCoop supermercati autogestiti in valori.it](#)

[Supermercati cooperativi in rigeneriamoterritorio.it](#)

[Supermercati autogestiti in ilgamberorosso.it](#)

[Gruppi di acquisto solidale in ilgioraledelcibo.it](#)

[Gruppi di acquisto solidale in repubblica.it](#)

[Supermercados cooperativos in ica.coop](#)

[Park Slope Food Coop website](#)

[Red de supermercados cooperativos in economiasolidaria.org](#)

[Red Supermercados cooperativos in Facebook.com](#)

[Supermercados cooperativos in climatica.coop](#)

[Video Food Coop](#)

[Interfoodcoop map Cooperative Supermarkets in Europe](#)

[Supermarches Cooperatifs France website](#)

[Supermarchés coopératifs & participatifs France Map in framacarte.org](#)

[Cooperative Supermarkets in frontiersin.org](#)

[French Participative Supermarkets IDEASS article 2022](#)

