

## Worker Cooperatives in Chile

I proposed to do my field research in Chile with the following research question: How does the structure of worker cooperatives foster workplace equality that, despite external challenges, allows for the success of the organization? A worker cooperative is a business entity that is owned and controlled by the people who work in it. Within a worker cooperative, the rights of workers are respected and upheld because all workers have a say in their workplace. I was interested in learning about how this democratic economic structure could be successful, especially within a highly capitalist economy. This is why the case of Chile was interesting to investigate the situation of worker cooperatives, because worker cooperatives have existed both before and after Chile transitioned in the 1970s to the open, free-market economy it has today.

### **Accomplishments**

In the process of setting up my research project and making connections to conduct my field research, I talked to several professors who studied and who had advised worker cooperatives in Santiago. I also had conversations with several people who had been involved in the Chilean government, including a former ambassador of Chile and a former economic advisor in the Ministry of the Economy. Through these conversations, I learned about the atmosphere of worker cooperatives in Chile and the current challenging situation that many worker cooperatives faced.

I had proposed to do an in-depth case study of one worker cooperative, including both ethnography and interviews. However, through my initial conversations with professors and professionals, I discovered that the majority of worker cooperatives in Santiago are small, composed of 10 workers or less, and doing an ethnography of the cooperative through

observations would not be the best way to study the cooperative; most cooperatives have a small central office, but the majority of the workers in the cooperative would be working on different projects at separate project sites. Therefore, instead of a case study of one worker cooperative, I researched two worker cooperatives in Santiago by conducting interviews with workers at each cooperative, with a focus on participation of workers and the process of decision making within each cooperative.

The two worker cooperatives with which I conducted my research were very different. The first was composed of nine associates who install electric work in new and restored buildings. Through my interviews with workers at this cooperative, I learned about the way in which they began their cooperative, their motive for doing so, and how they have adapted to overcome challenges they have faced. They found that one of the most important aspects of their success is the attitude of their members; a member of their cooperative has to be committed to working for this type of business, meaning that they have to be aware that their actions affect their fellow associates. Also, because they had found ways to overcome challenges that worker cooperatives usually face, such as making difficult decisions and promoting equality among all members, they acted as mentors to new worker cooperatives in Santiago that were facing those same challenges.

The second worker cooperative I researched was composed of associates who had recently graduated from college with a degree in Commercial Engineering, a major that in the United States would be a combination of Business and Economics. They decided to form a worker cooperative because they wanted a business in which they could see each other as equals. Additionally, they wanted to use the business skills that they had learned in college to help advise other cooperative businesses in Santiago. In this way, they worked as consultants to other

cooperatives. This worker cooperative was small, so they themselves had figured out a smooth process of decision-making, but one of the cooperatives they were advising was composed of over 80 workers who had difficulty coming to decisions as a group and maintaining good relations between all workers of the cooperative. Therefore, the size of the worker cooperative had an impact on the ability of workers to participate in their business and on the ease of the decision-making process.

### **Challenges**

I faced several challenges in conducting my research on worker cooperatives in Santiago, Chile this summer. The first was that the situation of university student protests has made getting my research project established more difficult than I had anticipated. Many of the universities in Santiago were on strike or student takeover from the beginning of May through the beginning of June, at which time they negotiated to have classes in session again. The Universidad de Santiago de Chile (USACH), the university at which several professors who studied worker cooperatives were employed, was on strike during this time. This situation made it more difficult than I had anticipated to establish meetings with these professors who could provide me with guidance and connections to set up my research project.

Second, the process of establishing the connections in order to conduct my field research was a challenging process that required me to approach people to ask for their help and a bit of their time. The first challenge of this was the language. After spending almost six months studying abroad in Chile, I was confident in my ability to be able to communicate effectively in Spanish, but there would still be times when I would not understand certain words and there would be times when coming up with a quick response was difficult. However, I learned that people would have patience with me, because the beauty of communication is that most people

want to understand and be understood. The second challenge of this was being comfortable approaching people to ask for their help. I reminded myself that I was conducting this research project for a reason, and that what I was going to learn about worker cooperatives in Santiago could contribute to research on how a worker cooperative can be successful. These were personal challenges that I overcame with practice and because of the positive experiences I had in asking people for help or guidance with my project. Everyone I talked to, after I told them that I was interested in worker cooperatives and that I was conducting this research for a capstone project, was enthusiastic and willing to provide me with knowledge or guidance. I was pleasantly surprised with their kindness and generosity. I learned to forget my fear of asking; the worst that could happen is that they could say no, and even if they did, I would be in no worse of a position than where I began.

### **Future Goals**

I am very happy to have had the opportunity to conduct this research project in Chile. The subject of worker cooperatives intrigued me when I first learned about the presence of worker cooperatives around the world as an alternative structure of economic organization, and I was interested in investigating how worker cooperatives could be an alternative method of economic development.

I will use the research I collected this summer to write the report for my capstone project for the minor in International Development Studies, and I will present my research findings at the Human Development Conference held in February 2016 at the University of Notre Dame. Additionally, I will share my final report with both of the worker cooperatives in Santiago, Chile with whom I conducted my research. Both cooperatives have told me that they are excited to read what I learned about their cooperative and what I discovered about the situation of worker

cooperatives in Santiago. Beyond Notre Dame, I would like to work in a career at the cross-section of economics, Latin America, and development. Therefore, this research is a launching point to determine how to promote fair working conditions and workers' rights through economic policy.