

Co-operatives

Building Community, Nurturing Health, Promoting Sustainability

Editor's note: Are you a member of a co-op? If not, you are encouraged to join one. If you are a member, you understand why Hill Connections features co-operatives as inspirational. Co-operatives are wonderful alternative forms of business organization.)

Co-operatives Are Wonderful!

A **co-operative** is an “autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically-controlled enterprise.” Co-operatives are everywhere but are especially prevalent in farming country where there is generally a long history with this form of business.

Food co-ops are one of the most popular and visible forms. Shopping at the **People's Food Co-op** in La Crosse, Wisconsin, is a highlight of my week. Their produce, except for the organics, is the most reasonably priced, the freshest, and the best displayed in town. This surprises many people who think that co-op shopping is always more expensive than other grocery stores. It all depends upon what you buy.



At most food co-ops, you can shop many items in bulk, which are thus cheaper. You can otherwise choose selectively so that your grocery bills do not skyrocket. Many times their organic or natural products are featured as spe-

cial buys. I combine co-op purchases with regular supermarket shopping for a combination of best buys, interesting food, and affordable meals. But part of the enjoyment of a co-op is the specialty, quality products that are available. There are often treats and delights, such as from the deli or bakery counters that exist nowhere else.

Support Community

One of the best things about co-ops is that they support community. Cooperatives:

- Are based upon consumer membership, control, and **principles**
- Deal with local producers whenever possible
- Seek to educate their members about their products and involve them in democratic decisions

Co-ops are unusual also in that they have a board of directors that oversees the organization for members who have voting rights. Membership may be open and voluntary or it may be restricted to those with vested interests. However, in the case of food co-ops, their members benefit from such things as price breaks and a monthly dis-



count. Members also commonly receive a newsletter where they learn about specials and educational opportunities, such as trips to local growers.

Some of the smaller co-ops ask their members to work in the store for a day or several each month. Food co-ops seek to educate their members about natural products and specialize in providing them. They, like other co-ops, express their concern for community by being a model of an environmentally aware, socially just, community-based business that uses responsible employment practices. Their values and benefits are integrated into all their interactions.

Are All Types and Sizes

Food co-ops are part of an international movement of co-operatives of all types and sizes. These range from small scale to multi-million dollar businesses across the globe. According to the **International Co-operative Alliance (ICA)**, co-ops employ more than 100 million women and men and have more than 800 million members.

The co-operative model of enterprise can be applied to any business activity. They exist in traditional sectors such as agriculture,

fisheries, consumer and financial services, as well as housing and worker's co-operatives. They can also include carsharing, childcare, health and social care, funeral, music organizations, schools, sports, tourism, utilities, and transport.

Some of them are more or less invisible as co-ops and others trumpet their designation. Co-ops range in size from tiny to huge and can be found in many communities. Agricultural co-ops are also exceedingly common.

Almost all co-ops seek to strengthen the co-operative movement in general by working together through local, regional, national, and international structures. They are like a brotherhood and sisterhood in many ways. They tangibly work to strengthen other cooperatives.

One organic co-op, supplying a broad range of products to local and national food co-ops, has also become a new pool for supplying



People's Food Co-op, La Crosse, Wisconsin

other organic farmers. It developed a new, farmer-to-farmer model that ignores the market by adding organic feed crop growers as a new class of membership in its organic farmers co-operative. It seeks to provide the same kind of stable marketing opportunities to feed crop growers that livestock producers, such as dairy programs, have enjoyed for 20 years.

Balance People and Capital

Co-ops are different from other business forms because they put people, not capital, at the heart of their business. Every business is based upon the three interests of ownership, control and beneficiaries; but

co-ops are unique in that they vest all these interests in the hands of the user.

They follow a broader set of values than those associated purely with making a profit. Co-ops are democratically controlled by their members — which may be individuals,

groups, or even capital enterprises, depending upon the nature of the co-op; decisions aim to balance the need for profit with the needs of their members and the wider interests of the community.

Whatever the type or size of a co-op, you will generally find that the management of such an enterprise welcomes visits or conversation about their business. They tend to be extraordinarily friendly people who are exceptionally proud of their egalitarian, unique form of contribution to the economy of the world.

Co-operatives are truly an inspiring human endeavor!