

Co-operation - and Universities and CollegesRESEARCH AND THE S.C.S.

by

RITA RHODES

(Education Liaison Officer,  
Co-operative Development Agency)

The Co-operative Movement has long attracted the interest of researchers and academics, dating back to the Webbs and G. D. H. Cole and, more recently, Banks, Halsey, Ostergaard and Backstom. Renewed interest in the Co-operative idea is likely to heighten concern both in research and teaching. It therefore seems an appropriate time to enquire about the role of the Society for Co-operative Studies, bearing in mind that one of the purposes of the Society is to 'promote and exchange information and experience in Co-operative studies and research'. To try and stimulate discussion, this article will attempt to identify current research facilities within the Movement; discuss how they may be better monitored and the benefit which might derive therefrom, and examine a few areas of possible future research. In looking at these the role of the Society will be kept very much in mind.

Although difficult to quantify there does appear to be an upsurge of interest in Co-operation. There are a number of reasons for this but important among them is that Co-operatives tend to emerge when needs or problems have not been solved by more traditional means.

During the decades immediately following the last war, Co-operative ideas tended to be somewhat eclipsed those of state and municipal socialism. Undoubtedly,

these contributed to the redressing of some of society's imbalances, but they did not prove to be the panaceas expected. Unemployment has returned. Housing problems remain, and incredibly in a supposed welfare state, there is a poverty trap. It would be facile and irresponsible to argue that Co-operation could provide all the answers to these problems. But a thread running through them is that of alienation. Co-operation with its emphasis on democracy and self-management could help reduce this. Moreover, it is significant that the most recent Co-operative growth has occurred in the problem areas of employment, housing and credit.

Monitoring this growth is difficult, so also is analysing it. A Co-operative central resource facility would be of considerable help. It need not be a large organisation undertaking actual research, for bodies already doing this exist in the Movement. But what is desirable is a central point where their findings could be listed and classified, leading eventually to the compilation of a comprehensive Directory of Co-operative Research in Britain. This could also help show where the solutions to problems in one sector of the Movement might have relevance to another sector.

Can I illustrate this by a personal experience? When I was the Sectional Education Officer to the Scottish Section of the Co-operative Union, I was concerned with the whole question of member relations in retail Societies and more particularly with providing training facilities for members wishing to become Directors of their Societies. There were many problems, not least the changing attitudes of members to their societies. It was not until I read a report entitled 'Member Society Relations in Agricultural Co-operation' by G. R. Foxall and M. M. McConnell-Wood of the Department of Agricultural Marketing, University of Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, that I realized that there were many

similarities between retail and agricultural Societies on the question of membership. Not that these cheered me in any way, but they did help to point at a more realistic view of the situation. The point I wish to make, though, is that I came across that report quite by accident during a visit to the International Co-operative Alliance. This is perhaps the one body whose research covers all sectors of the Movement but its international scope makes its research too wide and, at the same time, too shallow for our needs.

### Existing Research Capabilities in the Movement

May I now try to identify the existing research capabilities within the British Co-operative Movement. In the consumer sector, research was given a boost by the resolutions proposed by the Education Executive and passed at the 1977 Convention and Congress. The result was, the Co-operative Liaison, Education and Research Unit based at the Co-operative College. As its name implies it does things other than research. Because its establishment is so recent it is not yet clear what will be the extent and nature of its research work.

There are two other major research capabilities in the consumer sector; the research department of the Co-operative Wholesale Society and the Economic and Research Department of the Co-operative Union. They have functional rather than academic objectives, though by no means does one exclude the other. On a limited and smaller basis there is also the research department of the Co-operative Party.

In the agricultural sector of the Movement the Plunkett Foundation has an honourable research record while the recently established Co-operative Research Unit of the Open University is initially concentrating on industrial co-operatives.

Besides these sources of research there are the more diffuse ones carried out by college and university students undertaking historical and business studies. There are also the Research Councils who sponsor research and of particular importance to the Movement is the Social Science Research Council.

Having looked at the various research bodies associated with the Movement, we see that they are fragmented. Closer liaison is desirable for a number of reasons.

Research covers many things. It records operational results and facilitates comparisons of various kinds. Besides providing historical data it can also indicate future trends. At this stage in the expansion of Co-operation in Britain it could play a particularly valuable part in making available to sectors of the Movement lessons learned in other sectors. But these have to be identified and listed. So far no central institution is undertaking this work and the question arises as to whether the Society for Co-operative Studies would be the appropriate body. I believe it would.

As we noted earlier, the Society includes among its purposes the promotion and exchange of information and experience of Co-operative studies and research. This function has perhaps not been so well developed as the Society's other functions of providing a forum for the exchange of Co-operative ideas and the publication of the Bulletin. But if the Society were to extend its activities the question is bound to arise as to whether it has the necessary resources. Even a limited facility, monitoring research, and publishing a Directory, would increase demand on its resources. How then, might they be increased?

### More Resources and Members for the S.C.S.

The Society is a membership organisation and its income is determined by the level of its subscriptions and the number of its members. The former has recently been raised and there are good reasons for believing that the latter could be increased. But from where could new membership come? There are two main sources, from members of new Co-operatives and from students and teachers in Further and Higher Education.

In examining the first of these it should be acknowledged that the Society was initially seen as a link between the largest sector of the Movement, the consumer sector, and academics. As that sector is joined by new and expanding sectors it is to be hoped that the Society for Co-operative Studies will reflect changes in a widening of its membership base. The second source of new members could be from among academics. They could help keep the Society up to date with what is happening in Co-operative research and teaching. They might also call on it to provide a service which I believe will become increasingly necessary as the movement expands, that of education and training.

The consumer sector of the Movement has for 60 years been well served by the Co-operative College and the Education Department of the Co-operative Union. But some new sectors are beginning to use local Further Education Colleges and branches of the Workers' Education Association. Elsewhere, there have been instances of colleges approaching Co-operatives and offering to provide courses for them. There may be a problem here inasmuch as many colleges will have few teachers trained or experienced in Co-operation. The Society could become a teachers' resource centre.

### Possible Research Areas

But to return to the question of research, I believe that the Society should become more engaged in proposing topics and areas for research. May I make a few suggestions.

- One of the basic Co-operative principles is that Co-operatives should co-operate with other Co-operatives. This seems particularly pertinent today. For many years it was believed that the application of the consumer theory of Co-operation could lead to the Co-operative Commonwealth. Well, it has not done so and for various reasons, among them the withdrawal of the C.W.S. from primary production and manufacturing, and the decline of dividend and the concept of membership in retail societies. But there may be a new route to the Co-operative Commonwealth through the multiplicity of different kinds of Co-operative societies. Whether it be the Co-operative Commonwealth we are aiming for, or the more prosaic achievement of a growing Co-operative sector in the British economy, there is likely to be greater chance of success if Co-operatives can co-operate with each other. At present there are very few mechanisms to help them do so. Exploring possibilities could be a useful area of research.
- Another could be the effect of statism on the Co-operative characteristics of voluntarism and self-help, while yet another could relate to future Co-operative democratic structures.
- It is exciting to be present when history is made. Those of us at the 1979 Congress of the Co-operative Union undoubtedly felt this when Mr Howard Perrow delivered his presidential address. The Single National Federation is dead: long live Co-op Great

Britain! As one wit next to me observed, it is not so much a question of black or white but shades of J. C. Gray! The outcome of Mr Perrow's proposals lie in the future but I can't help feeling that they would have more chance of success if research suggested the kind of democratic structures that could inhabit Co-op Great Britain.

To sum up then, developments in the British Co-operative Movement should be reflected in the Society for Co-operative Studies both in its membership and in its functions. The former should be attracted from new Co-operatives as well as from academics who could benefit from the resource facilities the society provided. Important among these should be the monitoring of current Co-operative research in all sectors of the Movement and the compilation of a Directory of Co-operative Research and Teaching in Britain. The Society should not only centralise the monitoring of research but should also be more ready, than it has in the past, to suggest new areas of research.