

Co-operation between Co-operatives
Reflections on the Canadian Experience

by

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"Each for all" was an early slogan of the Co-operative movement in English-speaking parts of Canada. Today that movement displays a dynamism and confidence that is rarely present in the British Co-operative scene. Its sense of common purpose is reflected in the fact that a single Co-operative Union unites at a national level the various sectors of the movement. Credit unions, agricultural Co-operatives and retail Co-operatives are all represented by the Co-operative Union of Canada. There is an urgency and a challenge in the CUC claim that Co-operatives should be recognised as a "third force" in the economy alongside private enterprise and state corporations.

Co-operatives in Community Development

My interest in Co-operatives is from the perspective of community development. Community development is the process by which groups of people at a local or community level organise themselves, with appropriate support from public authorities, to achieve a greater measure of control over their economic and social situation. Community development is not solely about material improvements: it is also about people gaining a greater sense of their own value and dignity, and a sharper awareness of the society in which they live. Co-operatives, therefore, are an important organisational mechanism for promoting community develop-

ment. I was privileged to spend three months in Canada in 1980 looking at the contribution of the Co-operative movement to rural community development. Among other things, I visited two villages - Chéticamp in Cape Breton and Tignish in Prince Edward Island - where most economic organisations ran on a Co-operative basis. They had been deeply influenced by the Antigonish Movement in the 1930's. I also spent some time in rural Quebec, where a number of recent initiatives in community economic development have only tenuous links with the established co-operative movements. My comments, therefore, are based on a limited ground-level view. I am not an expert on the Canadian movement as a whole.

The Practical Possibilities

"All Co-operatives, in order to best serve the interests of their members and their communities, should actively co-operate in every practical way with other Co-operatives at local, national and international levels" (ICA principles, 1966). In what way can practical expression be given to these principles? In my view, there are five main possibilities:

1. The formation of trading links, where Co-operatives supply each other with goods and services, including financial services.
2. Joining together to promote Co-operative development: not simply in the expansion of existing Co-operatives, but also in the formation of new Co-operatives.

3. Collaboration in the provision of information, advice, education, research and training, both for Co-operators themselves, and for the wider community.
4. Creation of a forum in which Co-operatives can share experience.
5. Representation of Co-operative interests to the outside world.

My first observation would be that Co-operation between Co-operatives goes hand-in-hand with Co-operative development. The realisation that there is not only a Co-operative sector but also a Co-operative movement, with common principles and common goals, is allied to the reaching out of that movement into the wider society. The Co-operative Future Directions Project has had the effect of galvanising Canadian Co-operatives into thinking about their place in Canadian society. Co-operation challenges Co-operatives to think of themselves not simply as trading organisations but also to recall their social purpose.

Conditions and Consequences

Co-operation between Co-operatives also implies a tolerance of the variety of political perspectives held by different Co-operatives. The Co-operative Union of Canada, while it has been closely associated with political movements, is not affiliated to a particular political party. Is the existence of a "Co-operative Party" a barrier to unity within the British Co-operative movement?

Co-operatives tend to have better vertical

links with their own central or federal institutions than they have horizontal links with Co-operatives trading in the same community. Even in the "Co-operative communities" of Chéticamp and Tignish, each of which has at least half-a-dozen Co-operatives, there was no formal organisation drawing Co-operatives together at a local level. This lack of horizontal links weakens the impact of Co-operatives in community development. While the sense of a united movement, expressed through the Co-operative Union of Canada, is strong at a national level, it is not always translated into practical action in the local community.

The channelling of local finance into local Co-operative development could in theory provide an instrument for this kind of local unity. Credit unions are potentially one channel, but their terms of reference restrict their local lending to individuals rather than to Co-operatives. In Quebec, the Caisses d'Entraide Economique are a kind of local Co-operative bank: they would repay further study.

In Quebec, too, are a number of "development Co-operatives" whose function is to promote a variety of locally-controlled economic and social enterprises, and whose membership is open to the community as a whole. The nearest British parallel is in the community Co-operatives in the Western Isles of Scotland. These development Co-operatives have a good record of mobilising local support for Co-operative development, but have tended to be marginal to the interests of the Co-operative movement as a whole. Yet one of the reasons for having central institutions should be in order to enable small, local Co-operatives to flourish.

This brings me to my final point. Co-operatives need to be alive to the possibility of alliances beyond a strict definition of the frontiers of the Co-operative movement. Many of the most interesting developments in Canadian Co-operation - the "new wave" Co-operatives - were growing up outside the established movement. A number of social projects - community halls, community radio stations, medical Co-operatives - were operating as Co-operatives in spirit, if not in name. A variety of institutions, in government, in the education sector, in community organisations, had become interested in Co-operative development. In some cases the "outsider" had a keener sense of Co-operative principles than people within the movement itself. The development of creative co-operation between all those subscribing to Co-operative ideals is likely to be a major stimulus to creative change within the Co-operative movement.

Some Basic References

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