

Agreement on Inter-Sector Collaboration

In Journal 67 George Jones, Director of the Co-operative Development Agency looked back over his experience in the past - and ahead to the possibilities of further “co-operation between Co-operatives” and with government, after the winding-up of the CDA in September of this year. Now in this Journal, Bert Oram, first Chairman of the Agency re-visits his experience and reports his views on the retrospect and on the prospects.

There has already emerged a firm “declaration of intent”. The Inter-Sector Forum, set up by the CDA and widely representative of Co-operative organisations and interests, including agricultural, consumer, fishery, housing and workers' Co-operatives, credit unions and government departments agreed on 22 February 1990 on a provision for some of the functions of the CDA to be continued. The document approved by the Forum is printed below - in full, except for an illustrative diagram.

Government Support

The Government has indicated that it may make available up to £600,000 over three years, on the basis of “£1 for £1” contributions from the Co-operative side. The Government envisages that its money will be used for the continuation of the Forum, for marketing activities and for Inner City development.

The present arrangement is for the Co-operative Liaison Group to meet six monthly - the first formal meeting is set for 10 May - and for a Co-operatives Forum of wider scope, similar to the existing Inter-Sector Forum, to meet annually.

The Proposals Approved

“Preamble

At the meeting of the Co-operative Forum held on October 18, 1989, a working group was requested to prepare proposals which provide for some of the functions of the CDA to be continued, in particular, that of bringing together the different Co-operative sectors within the United Kingdom so that they may jointly consider topics which affect all types of Co-operative.

The working group met on December 19, 1989, with the following results:

The starting point for the consideration of any proposal for a replacement of

the Inter-Sector Forum, and some of the functions of the CDA, is assumed to be that the major Co-operative organisations would not be prepared to devote the time of their senior officials, or any other resources, to any activities that did not bring “real benefits” to the participating organisations. Therefore, any proposals put forward need to facilitate productive discussions between different Co-operative sectors, which, in turn, lead to definite action being taken which is in the collective interest of the various Co-operative sectors. Also, the leadership in most sectors is interested in being made aware of the activities of other Co-operative sectors and exchanging experiences, but this is not an activity to which they would, in general, be prepared to accord a very high priority. However, it is recognised that there are a number of key issues that have the potential to affect all Co-operative sectors, and that the facility to address jointly such issues would be extremely valuable.

Outline Proposals

Arrangements be made to call a six-monthly meeting of a “Co-operative Liaison Group”. Participants in this group would be limited to UK National Co-operative representatives/trading organisations which were independent (i.e., non-Governmental) and sector specific.

The functions of the proposed Liaison Group were identified as follows:

- (a) To consider matters of common interest to all Co-operative sectors, establishing specialist working groups to deal with specific topics and, if necessary, employing the services of specialists to carry out any mutually agreed specific tasks.
- b) To arrange an annual meeting at which all organisations involved with the promotion and development of Co-operatives in the United Kingdom may participate (on a similar basis to the present Inter-Sector Co-operative Forum). This annual meeting should be known as the “Co-operatives Forum”, its purpose being to facilitate the exchange of experience and explore opportunities for any joint activities.
- c) To undertake any other activities which it is mutually agreed would be beneficial to the organisations in membership of the Co-operative Liaison Group.

Commitment and Costs

It is emphasised that the extent of the commitment by the members of the Co-

operative Liaison Group would be limited to the extent of being represented at the initial meetings. Any further commitment would be dependent upon the value which they placed upon their participation and upon any activities which they may mutually agree were worthy of joint funding. The Co-operative Forum would be arranged on the basis of it being self-financing.

Secretariat

The Co-operative Union, Ltd., had agreed to provide the secretariat for the Co-operative Liaison Group, at least to facilitate the first two meetings. After this, a decision as to the basis of financing the secretariat of the Group and any mutually agreed activities would be one to be made by the Liaison Group. It has been indicated that the Government (DTI) may be prepared to make some contribution towards the initial costs of the establishment of a replacement for the Co-operatives Forum. However, this matter is to be considered by the Co-operative Liaison Group.

Practical Implications

The work of the proposed Co-operative Liaison Group would be concentrated upon formulating any joint response which was needed from Co-operatives as a form of business organisation. The main function will be to lobby Government, and any other relevant institutions, in favour of the Co-operative business option. However, other matters of joint interest could be pursued. Some of the issues which may be agenda items for a Co-operative Liaison Group were as follows:

- Legislation relating to Co-operatives (UK and European), Taxation, Capital Sources and Structures, Trading, Training (e.g., TEC's and NVQ's), the Public Image of Co-operatives, Development Assistance, Inter-Sector Trading, Relationships with "the Professions".

Constitutions and Method of Working

A concise constitution would be required to be adopted by the Co-operative Liaison Group in order to formalise the relationship between those Co-operative organisations involved, and an initial draft has been prepared.

Commitment

It is considered important that each of the organisations which it is proposed should participate in the Co-operative Liaison Group indicate that there is a high level of commitment to the concept of the Liaison Group and that they would be prepared to make a good effort in ensuring that the potential benefits obtainable from the arrangements described could, in fact, materialise."