

UKCC - International Comparisons

In Journal 72, the origins, objectives, composition and intentions of the United Kingdom Co-operative Council were introduced by its chairman, Keith Brading. In Journal 73 he reported the settlement of a grant from government, the attention of the Council to the Draft European Co-operative Statute and other lines of development, including "A comprehensive review and study of subjects of cross-sector relevance to Co-operatives . . . which could be used in presenting the needs of the Co-operative sectors generally to an incoming government." We shall, of course, continue to review the UKCC's progress.

The instalment below is a first response to the advice "And what should they know of Britain who only Britain know?" We are very grateful for the contributions from Jacques Moreau, President of the Groupement National de la Cooperation and Lynden Hillier, Executive Director of the Canadian Co-operative Association which draw from the experience of their national councils guidelines on what has to be done (or avoided) to give the best chance of success.

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R.L.M.

1. Groupement National de la Coopération

by Jacques Moreau

For many years, the Co-operative movement in France has been characterised by the coexistence of more than a dozen federations and confederations each with its own family of Co-operatives (consumers, production, agriculture, credit, etc.) and often with a particular legal status. Each one has members of all religious and political convictions, although this has not always been the case historically. The Groupement National de la Coopération (G.N.C.) was created in 1970 with complete respect for the personalities of these organisations, many of which have had well-staffed legal and technical departments serving their members for many years. Their gradual coming together in the G.N.C. has reflected their joint interests but has not affected their autonomy.

Subsidiarity and Consensus

This explains the G.N.C.'s two basic operating principles: subsidiarity and consensus. The former means that the G.N.C. only deals with problems which lie outside the scope or possibilities of each member organisation. The latter means that the group cannot take any position other than unanimously.

The principle of subsidiarity has a practical consequence: the G.N.C. is a small organisation (four employees) whose role is to coordinate the work of its members' departments and not to replace them. The essential role of the G.N.C. secretariat is to arrange meetings of working parties of specialists on the matter concerned from member organisations. The questions covered are those which de jure or de facto are common to all the organisations. In addition to legal or fiscal questions, these working parties also consider the problems of training company directors, the "Co-operative audit", etc.

Another practical consequence, arising from the principle of consensus, is that the G.N.C. only works on subjects chosen by the Board of Directors, on which all the federations are represented. In addition, between meetings of the Board and the Bureau, relations between the secretariat and the federations are maintained by "correspondents", each a direct colleague of the Chairman of his federation.

Fields of Activity

These apparently restrictive rules do not prevent the G.N.C. from undertaking a great deal of activity recognised by the authorities as representing the opinions of Co-operatives.

The fields of its activity are highly diverse. They can be classified in four main categories.

Legal and Fiscal

Legal and fiscal questions represent one of the main fields of the G.N.C. Our lawyers and tax experts, who meet in an active working party, coordinate our action both for specific and daily questions and for problems as general as the reform of the basic Co-operative Act of 1947: the text drawn up by the government and currently before Parliament was based on a G.N.C. draft. The G.N.C. also intervenes to ensure that new regulations adopted by the authorities take account of the specific features of each Co-operative status. The same working party participated actively in the discussions which led to the Draft European Co-operative Statute.

Relations with Public Authorities and Administrative Departments

In this second area of activity the authorities have to be made aware of the problems of the Co-operative movement and of the role which it can play in the French economy in order to facilitate the success of our action.

In the political arena, the G.N.C. has brought about the creation of parliamentary groups at the National Assembly (and soon in the Senate), with which we have regular contacts, particularly at the start of the budget sessions. These groups,

whose scope was subsequently extended to the whole of the social economy (Co-operatives, associations, mutuels) include members from all parties.

In terms of the administration, the G.N.C. has a high level of representation on the "Conseil Supérieur de la Coopération", a consultative body chaired by the Prime Minister or a minister which he/she appoints and which also includes members of parliament and ministers. This board is consulted on draft legislation and regulations concerning the Co-operative movement. Between meetings of this board, a permanent bureau presided over by the Chairman of the G.N.C. deals with day-to-day business and specific questions.

A working party, CIFAD, has been created so that views can be exchanged among the Co-operative organisations which provide technical assistance to Co-operatives in African countries, particularly to coordinate their action with respect to the competent French departments.

In addition to these bodies, the G.N.C. communicates with politicians and civil servants (publication of a monthly newsletter, etc.) and maintains contacts with regional organisations of the Co-operative sectors.

Representation of the Co-operative Movement

The third field is the collective representation of the Co-operative movement on outside bodies: the G.N.C. belongs, nationally, to CNLAMCA (Comité National de Liaison des Activités Mutualistes, Cooperatives et Associatives); it is also a member of the International Co-operative Alliance - although some of its members are directly represented - and its chairman sits on the Executive Committee of the I.C.A.

It strives to coordinate or harmonise the activities of its members in these institutions.

It is not a member of any Community body: its members belong to the Co-operative sector groups which operate in Brussels. However, in important circumstances it has attempted to coordinate their interventions. The Co-operative banks working party created by the G.N.C., for instance, gives Co-operative banks an opportunity to exchange views on the work of the Community Co-operative Banks Group.

The importance of Co-operative banks in the French economy means that their views carry a great deal of weight.

In contrast, it does not directly intervene in relations with Eastern European countries, though it does contribute to the work of the "East-West Observatory",

created within the CNLAMCA, with other representatives of the social economy.

Joint Research

Finally, in the fourth area, joint research, the G.N.C. is participating in the I.C.A.'s work on Co-operative values. It recently welcomed Mr Sven Ake Böök, appointed for this purpose by the I.C.A. This work followed the G.N.C.'s publication of a "joint declaration" of Co-operative principles in 1987.

The G.N.C. also participates in various research bodies and supports the "Revue des Etudes Cooperatives, Mutualistes et Associatives".

The Conditions of Success

In conclusion, I would say that the G.N.C.'s success in fulfilling its role is closely linked to its compliance with the two principles of subsidiarity and consensus. G.N.C. is not a management tool although it has occasionally been forced to act as such (company director training): its essential role is as a "facilitator" and "spokesman".

Although the group's action does extend to theoretical fields, it is based on practicalities, i.e. the needs of its members. However, because of the very modesty of this objective, it has fostered understanding between Co-operative sectors which often ignored each other previously and has steadily contributed to the moral unification of the French Co-operative movement.

Indeed, its failures, and there have been some, resulted from deviations from these principles. Sometimes, in the first few years after its creation, the G.N.C. secretariat appeared to be pursuing its own objectives, based on an ideal (and perfectly respectable) conception of the development of the Co-operative movement rather than the practical needs of the member organisations. Some of the resulting interventions inevitably caused misunderstandings. This was particularly the case when different sectors were unable to agree on a specific point, thus preventing joint action, or when the concerns which lay behind these interventions involved only a small number of members. This may also have occurred when concerns of a political nature seemed to appear in our discussions.

I believe that these early errors have now been completely rectified and that there is little chance that they will reappear. In such a diversified context as the Co-operative movement in France, pragmatism remains essential.

2. Canadian Co-operative Association

by Lynden Hillier

Co-operatives have played a very important role in the development of many regions of Canada and continue to do so today. In order to do this they have had to find ways to work together at the local, regional, a national level. One of the more recent examples of Co-operative involvement in regional development is the steps that are currently being taken to establish credit unions in the mainly aboriginal communities of Canada's north to ensure that citizens in this region of the country have access to financial services. This initiative has involved a partnership between Co-operatives in the south and Co-operatives in the north, including joint approaches to government to ensure the right kind of overall environment for this development.

The above is but one example of the need for Co-operatives to work together in Canada. With world changes which are affecting markets for our producer Co-operatives and sources of supply for our consumer Co-operatives one could argue that the need for Co-operatives to work together today is even more important than it has been in the past.

Two Into One

Canadian Co-operatives do have a history of working together but even with this history, as individual business issues become more complex and as individual Co-operatives become larger, the perceived need to work together becomes more and more obscure. Up until 1987 there existed in Canada two national, multi-Co-operative organizations, the Co-operative College of Canada and the Co-operative Union of Canada. At that time it was determined that these two organizations should be merged to form one.

This direction was taken for two reasons. First, it was perceived that some of the work previously done by the Co-op College was now being done by individual Co-operatives and therefore the need to have the national educational institution was not that great. Second, however, was a recognition that it was important to have some strong national identity for Co-operatives in Canada. So the outcome of this was the formation of the Canadian Co-operative Association (C.C.A.) in September of 1987.

Areas of Action

The challenge at the national level has been to keep the members interested in the work of the C.C.A. The membership of C.C.A. comprises 35 provincial,

regional, and national Co-operatives. The members tend not to be local consumer Co-ops or credit unions but rather their federations, wholesales, and centrals. C.C.A. has kept its members interested and engaged by adopting a single value, "Member-Driven". This value has meant that C.C.A. has consulted very closely with its members before it has developed a particular program or initiative. At the same time it is expected that C.C.A. as the national association play a leadership role so this approach becomes one of the dilemmas which we face.

Based on the member-driven, consultative approach described above, C.C.A. focuses on three areas: Government Affairs and Policy Development, Education and Conferences, and International Development. All of the above are paid for through a dues assessment to member organizations with the exception of the International Development Program which is funded in large part by the government of Canada through the Canadian International Development Agency.

Consensus on Future Development

Over the past three years C.C.A. was engaged in a major policy development process with its member organizations in order to map out some directions for Canadian Co-operatives in areas which are key for the future. These key areas included the following: the impact of globalization on Co-operatives; the impact of urban and rural restructuring on Co-operatives; attracting quality elected officials; how Co-operatives should communicate to government. Regional dialogues were held across the country on each of these topics. These regional perspectives were then fed in to a National Congress in June of 1991. Seven areas of consensus evolved from this gathering of 400 people from all kinds of Co-operatives across Canada. The seven areas of consensus are as follows:

1. Develop leadership for the present and the future to ensure that Co-operatives continue as a vibrant option for Canadians;
2. Broaden the understanding, awareness and appreciation of the nature and place of Co-operatives in Canada;
3. Implement strategies to ensure that Co-operatives at all levels represent the changing face of Canadian society;
4. Develop an effective, consistent and co-ordinated approach to representing Co-operative policies to government at all levels;
5. Improve capitalization in all respects including investment, debt and retained earnings, without compromising control structures;

6. Maintain Co-operative identity, but restructure to respond to changing markets, both domestically and internationally;

7. Revitalize the Co-operative sector by supporting the development of new Co-operatives in areas of Canadian society where the Co-operative approach can serve needs for products and services.

These seven directions will preoccupy the C.C.A. for the next three years and currently are proposed as critical objectives for the organization.

The Dilemma of the National Association

In a country like Canada there is a lot of diversity and yet we still seem to get along even with some national pride. But the regional diversity means that the regional interest is always stronger than the national interest. Notwithstanding this there is need and desire for a national presence and it is this dilemma that must be dealt with on an ongoing basis. We have dealt with this by ensuring that what we do is what the members want and are prepared to pay for. If it is not, then we do not do it. We have also ensured through our budgeting process and our communications process with members that C.C.A. does not get off on tangents to which the members cannot relate.

It is an interesting association but a challenging one. It reflects almost exactly Canadian society, where top-down never works.

In Passing

Youth, beauty, graceful action seldom fail;

But common interest always will prevail

Dryden-Absalom and Achitophel