

## ▣ Striving for Peace, Justice and Sustainability through Co-operative Movements

- Heather Tufts

The idea of local people cooperating with each other to provide for the essentials of living and contributing to self-reliant, community-based economies is the epitome of common sense.

The co-operative movement emerged in Europe as a reaction to early 19th-century industrialization which created widespread worker displacement. This social and economic alternative evolved following a set of inclusive principles where each member had one vote regardless of the investment made. The intentional value of member-owned co-operatives includes a vision of collective economics either non-profit or profit sharing, within a framework of transparency, social justice and efficacy.

The co-operative model of enterprise can be applied to any business activity and has become an international movement. Co-operatives exist in traditional economic sectors such as agriculture, fisheries, consumer and financial services, housing, and production (workers' co-ops). However, global co-operative activity spans to a large number of sectors and activities including car-sharing, child-care, health and social care, food distribution, the arts, schools, sports, tourism, transportation and alternative media.

It is inaccurate to equate co-operatives with the traditional cooperation amongst indigenous communities in pre-contact societies. Although there were natural systems of sharing in many indigenous societies they also included matriarchal or patriarchal hierarchies and the concept of land or property ownership was unborn. However there are some obvious lessons and relevant comparisons especially in consideration of environmental integrity, resource management and relationship to the community. But co-operatives are frequently founded as a response to modernity and social injustices rather than being the integral value of society.

Authentic co-operative ventures embrace the guiding principles of participatory democracy and sustainability but it can not be assumed that all co-operatives are ethical. Although most co-ops maintain these values which empower "the village" a few have denigrated the process and lost their way. For example if a co-operative embraces the profit sharing model while ignoring its members' wishes for environmental conservation, ethical trade or gender equity then this contradicts the intention of the movement.

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The International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) raises awareness about co-operatives by providing information about the significant role they can play in society. ICA promotes the co-operative model as a contributing and pro-active alternative to a number of economic and social issues. The alliance is available to help individuals and government authorities understand the co-operative model of enterprise so that best practices can be implemented regionally, nationally and internationally.

The transformation that has occurred in the work-place as a result of free trade agreements, outsourcing, the rise of China and India as significant economic players and the augmentation of the unemployed or under-employed suggests an urgent need for alternative social and economic models. Co-operatives could play a major role in transitional and transformational communities and hence establish a leadership position on issues of peace, social justice, climate change and food security.

“Peace and social well-being are not only relevant to co-operatives but co-operatives are relevant to the peacemaking process in communities and societies throughout the world,” says Dr. Yehudah Paz, chairman of the Negev Institute for Strategies of Peace and Development.

The ICA is strengthening its commitment to address some of these issues by developing an invigorated protocol for co-operatives. This initiative led to "Global Crisis - Co-operative Opportunity" as the theme of the 2009 November ICA Assembly. A freshly designed economic model includes a fair and just redistribution of resources and collective sustainable development practices.

Progressive co-operatives can pose a significant dilemma to the capitalist system. Whereas the movement offers real solutions to poverty, sustainability and even conflict resolution, co-operative enterprises are the antithesis of the profit-driven agenda of global capitalism. However it is evident that co-operatives provide valuable economic and social capital within communities or better still, the co-operative is the community!

According to Carol Hunter, director of the Canadian Co-operative Association (CCA) co-operatives are part of the solution to revitalizing Canada's economy: "The history of co-ops shows us that they were often formed during hard economic times, so they are as relevant today as they have ever been," she said. "Since most co-ops are locally based, they not only provide jobs, but also generate wealth which remains in the community."

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Locally housing co-ops are part of the solution to the Canadian affordable housing crisis but need to be integrated into a National Housing Policy. Agricultural policies in Canada do not provide incentives for a co-operative vision of farming and unless things change more land will be lost to development or farmers will be bankrupted. Regional and national governments should embrace the co-operative vision as one of the solutions to greener, sustainable economies.

Credit unions which have diminished the potential for unethical loan shark practices have challenged the operations of major banks. Agricultural co-ops have not only become the basis of food security in places like Cuba and Venezuela but have revitalized British farming practices after the devastating mad cow disease event. Naturally, harmonized co-operative ventures have restored fishing capacity in many Asian communities in organized resistance to globalization. In some countries the only access to health care is provided by health co-operatives and many jobs world-wide have been saved by the evolution of worker-owned, member shared business enterprises.

War-torn Nicaragua in the 1980s saw the birth of co-ops as part of the popular resistance movement. Although some of them disbanded after the war, new collectives have evolved as a result of this legacy. During a recent trip to Nicaragua, local activist Rosemary Mann visited some successful community-based tourism co-operatives. In El Lagartillo a rural, non-profit Spanish language school has been established within a co-operative village model. "Our co-operative village has inspired a new generation to work collaboratively," one of the villagers told Rosemary. The school contributes economically by attracting tourism to the community and has recently planted a collectively-managed coffee grove.

In Nicaragua co-operatives can access government grants for sustainable projects like water purification, composting latrines or solar panels and this opportunity encourages family groups to work together. The fertile, volcanic island of Ometepe in Lake Nicaragua is an ideal location for family-driven agrarian collectives and is a popular destination for eco-tourists. The Central American Support Committee (CASC) in Victoria sells fairly-traded organic coffee from Ometepe as a gesture of solidarity with the island co-operative.

In zones of conflict or post-conflict, women's co-operatives are often essential to rebuilding hope and pragmatism in a chaotic environment. In regions like East Timor, the Philippines and Afghanistan it has been the women who have grasped the inherent principles of co-operatives by breaking down existing male hierarchies and engaging in courageous, community-building, democratic processes. These co-operative ventures can return a degree of normalcy in the face of strife, great poverty and systemic injustice.

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Conflict situations embody gender oppression, economic inequities, political unrest, armed confrontation and natural disasters such as the 2004 tsunami. These are juxtaposed with inspiring examples of rebuilding through co-operative movements in Sri Lanka and Indonesia, peace building co-operatives in Ethiopia; sustainable development in Colombia amidst armed conflict; and women's co-operatives in Nepal. Numerous collectives have also emerged throughout Africa in response to the HIV AIDS pandemic and women lead the way in self-empowerment education, prevention and treatment. Empowering women in developing countries through education and access to land is also one of the keys to reducing world hunger.

In the Mexican Zapotec textile-producing community of Teotitlán del Valle, the indigenous responses to increased economic globalization and neoliberal policies found solutions in collective efforts. From the late 1980s, textile cooperatives were so successfully organized by women that by the summer of 2004 about 15 percent of the local households were involved in textile cooperatives. They were able to bypass local merchant control of the textile industry and have gained political and cultural rights in their community and in the global market as independent artisans.

Modern co-operatives represent an opportunity to assert the rights of women and respond to their needs as well as the co-operative movement's commitment to fight against child exploitation and improve the living conditions of the world's children. Child labour abuse is a plague of extreme poverty coupled with the unethical business practices entrenched in free trade. Genuine working co-operatives consider human rights and egalitarian environments and have shifted significantly from the standard array of ineffective solutions.

In socialist societies like Cuba, Venezuela and Bolivia the co-operative movement is integrated into the national vision but elsewhere most co-operatives arise as alternative systems. Raising the profile of co-operatives magnifies their potential, and facilitates community-to-community partnerships in the spirit of self-determination. Poverty reduction programs, housing and food security policies could be enhanced by sustainable, community-based initiatives and increased political will.

Strategic networks are replacing pockets of the competitive market with cooperative, peaceful and solution-building ventures. Collective human resources can empower local communities to challenge the status quo into new ways of thinking and doing.