



Co-operative Idea is Constantly Renewed

Brett Fairbairn, Saskatoon *StarPhoenix*, 13 October 1995

One hundred years ago, co-operatives formed an international organization. The creation of the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) in 1895 reflected the hopes of co-operatives for a world-wide movement to improve human conditions in all countries.

Those hopes have been partially fulfilled. Today there are nearly 700 million people around the world who live in families that have co-operative memberships. In sheer numbers, this is likely the largest social movement in human history.

The co-operative movement has changed and evolved since a century ago. Back then, urban consumer co-ops dominated. Now, the co-op movement is more diversified: agricultural co-ops and other kinds have proliferated in many countries. The co-op movement of a century ago was also European dominated; today, close to half of co-operative members are in India and China.

People continue to rely on co-operatives for all manner of goods and services. But like all social movements, co-operatives age. They may lose the vigour and idealism of their youth, or they may lose their independence and fall under the control of outside interests, including governments. This is a real problem for many co-operatives today.

It is critically important that established co-operatives revisit and refresh their co-operative commitment, and that new co-operatives are constantly created. These are the ways in which the co-operative movement is renewed.

A few weeks ago in Manchester, England, co-ops met to adopt a new statement of co-operative

principles to mark the hundredth anniversary of the International Co-operative Alliance. Here, where the Industrial Revolution began and where the modern co-op movement was started, co-ops renewed their commitments.

The delegates in Manchester revised and reaffirmed many time-honoured co-op principles, such as democratic member control on the basis of one member, one vote. They also adopted two new principles. These were not invented out of the blue but drawn from co-operative history for applicability to the present day.

The first new idea was a principle of co-operative autonomy — that co-operatives must not be controlled by government or by outside providers of capital. A co-operative is not a member democracy if such outside influences are strong.

The second new idea was a statement of commitment to community service. Co-ops should not serve their members in a narrow or exclusive way. Instead, they serve their members as part of a broader commitment to serving the community. Co-ops work to develop communities.

According to a draft of the new statement of co-operative identity, co-ops are “based on values of self-help, democracy, equality, and solidarity.” These enduring values have run through the last century of co-op history and remain the guiding values for the next century.

The co-op movement is renewed not only by fresh statements of principle, but also by the creation of generations of co-ops. In the last thirty years in Canada, we have seen health-service

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At almost the same time the delegates were meeting in Manchester, there was a conference in Saskatchewan examining the potential for “New Generation Co-operatives.” About 50 New Generation Co-ops have been created in the last five years in North Dakota and Minnesota, and they represent a revival of the grassroots co-operative spirit in an innovative form.

These co-ops aim at nothing less than “the Renaissance of rural North Dakota” — to reverse economic decline and depopulation. Others call the phenomenon “Co-op Fever.”

The New Generation Co-ops involve mostly younger farmers who have made substantial commitments of time and investment to build processing facilities for their products. They own and operate these new value-added ventures co-operatively. Members are tightly linked to the co-operative through capital contributions, two-way contractual business relationships, and democratic control.

They have also reinvented some co-op principles. For example, these are “closed-membership” co-ops in the sense that the total number of members is limited by the processing capacity of the co-op’s facilities.

South of the border, the new co-ops are spreading like wildfire. There was a time when Canadian farmers learned from the American ones about co-op elevators and community pools. Might the American New Generation Co-ops be showing a way for rural Saskatchewan’s future?

Another new co-operative venture is the Quint Development Corporation in Saskatoon. Quint is

co-operatives, housing co-operatives, and worker co-operatives. Typically, these new co-ops have exhibited high degrees of member commitment and enthusiasm. Their energy and dynamism have expanded the co-op sector of the economy. Other new kinds of co-operatives are emerging today.

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Quint is a nonprofit corporation for community development in five inner-city neighbourhoods of west Saskatoon. The members are people afflicted by and concerned about poverty, unemployment, and neighbourhood decline. Among other projects, they want to look at creating co-ops and working with existing ones.

The members of Quint Development Corporation have ambitious plans to take on issues like jobs and housing that make a big difference to the qual-

ity of life of inner-city people. In tackling poverty, poor housing, and unemployment, Quint is going back to the roots of the co-operative movement. It also embodies the kind of commitment to development of community that was recommended by delegates in Manchester last month.

If you know where to look, you can see how the co-operative idea is constantly being renewed — even right in our own backyard.

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