REPORT TO ACCA ON MEMBER ENGAGEMENT SESSIONS, MARCH 2016

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On 2 and 3 March 2016, the Alberta Community & Co-operative Association (ACCA) held consultation sessions in Airdrie and Stony Plain attended by representatives of its member organizations. The primary purpose of the consultation sessions was to engage members to obtain their perspectives on the future directions of ACCA. This document has been prepared by facilitator/consultant Brett Fairbairn for the board of ACCA to interpret the comments of the participants in the engagement sessions. A separate Appendix outlines the workshop process and presents the raw comments of the participants.

OVERVIEW OF MEETINGS

I observed the ACCA member engagement sessions in Airdrie (2 March 2016) and Stony Plain (3 March 2016). The sessions had 31 and 25 participants respectively, including representatives of ACCA members as well as ACCA board members and staff, and one member representative who participated by Skype in Stony Plain. Each session followed a similar structure, four hours of structured small- and large-group discussions guided by professional facilitator Scott Vaughn. The primary purpose in each case was to obtain perspectives from members on the future directions of ACCA, with intended outcomes as follows:

- Input from members on future ACCA focus areas and services
- Determination of how and when members want to be engaged with ACCA
- Reflections from members on "draft" ACCA strategic priorities
- Members have the opportunity to be heard and hear the perspectives and diverse needs of other ACCA members

This report synthesizes and interprets the comments from the two sessions. It is prepared for the board of ACCA in knowledge that ACCA intends to share the report with its members.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The sessions were successful and provided considerable information. Participants strongly supported the continued existence of ACCA and saw valuable roles for the organization. At the same time, many were clear that there must be change in the direction of tighter focus, greater accountability, and different communications. The greatest consensus was around three core roles for ACCA: to promote awareness of the co-operative business model among the public and government officials, network co-operatives to share information and work together, and conduct youth education programs. Members were less in agreement about ACCA's precise role in co-op development and government relations. Members offered help for ACCA, and indicated a willingness to pay fees to access training and events. While participants had a variety of suggestions, they appear to expect the ACCA board to determine future directions.

OVERALL IMPRESSIONS

As an outside participant, it appeared to me that both sessions were **outstandingly successful**. Member representatives came prepared for the discussions, participated thoughtfully, shared their ideas freely, and responded to each other, discussing their ideas in small and large groups. The flexible structure of the workshops appeared to enable them to share what was of most concern to them; I did not observe any signs of frustration or of participants feeling unable to get their ideas on the table. They engaged with each other, drawing out similarities and differences, and modifying or sharpening ideas over the courses of the sessions. Participants spoke and wrote *a lot*, providing extensive written and spoken feedback that is compiled in the Appendix to this report.

Significant credit goes to Michele Aasgard and ACCA staff, who enabled the participants to focus on the subject matter of the sessions. Michele provided an overview of ACCA's current activities and was present as a resource to the members; it seemed to me it was very important they they see and hear from her. ACCA staff prepared the rooms, setting up and taking down; provided for the needs of the participants; and perhaps most significantly facilitated small-group discussions. Staff captured ideas, writing them on cards and flip charts, freeing the other participants to talk and think. I commend the staff on their professional and non-defensive participation and think it was essential to the success of the events.

It also appeared to me that participants worked well with facilitator Scott Vaughan and appreciated the ways he encouraged them to focus as well as how he helped them manage the time. I thought both the participants and Scott were disciplined and professional, and that this helped them cover a lot of ground in four hours.

Given the outstanding work done by the participants, staff, and facilitator, it has been relatively easy for me to review the results of the sessions. I listened and took notes throughout the meetings, and have reviewed all of the written feedback from individuals and small groups. I am confident that I have a sense of the individual and collective views of those who were in the room. Naturally there are a few limitations to what I can say:

- I cannot reflect the views of member organizations or individuals who were not present
- My comments are not filtered by knowledge of which comments came from which organization. I can only summarize the views of *people*, all being equal. I cannot say much about what those in different sectors or sizes of member organizations may think.
- Most importantly, I bring the advantages of an outside perspective: blissful ignorance of politics and history. But power, money, and past experience matter in organizations. The board will have to apply these filters to interpret workshop results for action.

With those provisos, I would make a number of general observations.

First, participants saw many good and valuable roles in ACCA. There was support for every past and proposed future purpose and goal. There isn't anything ACCA does that isn't valued by someone.

Second, I was struck by how many participants wanted to find ways to help, to contribute, to be more involved. Only a small number of participants took what I would call a "show me what

you can do for me" perspective. For the most part there was no sense of them distancing themselves from ACCA; quite the opposite – they want to be closer to it. Interested individuals want to know more about what is going on with ACCA; and they want to find ways to help.

There were a number of what seemed to me to be really creative and unusual ideas for how to leverage resources and people from within the co-op sector:

- several participants suggested ACCA call on staff of member organizations for expertise and time (volunteers or secondments to work on particular projects or issues)
- a couple of participants raised ideas I would characterise as ways of making member participation mandatory: essentially having members commit, as a condition of being members, not only to pay dues, but to provide a certain number of attendees for meetings, offer a certain number of staff to assist, sponsor a certain number of youths, or accept a certain number of interns.

It seems to me that ACCA should not fail to take advantage of these offers and suggestions.

Third, I was impressed by how constructive people's comments were. I have participated in many meetings in my life, and I know that many thoughts can come out in negative or critical ways. In these sessions participants were respectful of ACCA and found constructive ways to express themselves rather than dwelling overly on deficiencies or dissatisfactions. This was especially true with respect to messages about focus, accountability, and budget.

A clear message was that many people want ACCA to narrow and focus its priorities, as well as to provide regular accountability reporting such as measurement of progress toward priorities. A number of participants commented that ACCA can't do everything: it must choose strategically, and make its choices clear. These messages were not prompted by anything in the workshop design or facilitation. People evidently came to the sessions prepared to deliver this message and they put it in their individual written comments at the outset. They raised the subject in small groups and those groups took it up and reported it to the whole. Various participants put similar themes into their closing messages to the board. It ran throughout the meetings. A larger number of participants addressed focus, accountability, and reporting issues in Airdrie than in Stony Plain, but the topic was raised in both sessions. Not every participant mentioned it, but no one challenged or disagreed with those who did. Overall this has to stand as one of the strongest and clearest themes to emerge from the meetings. My comment would be that a board should be very cautious about disregarding this kind of feedback.

In terms of specifics, there seemed to me to be two components. First, ACCA should identify a small number of things it aims to do well. Second, it should report regularly to members on its progress toward these things. Participants in Airdrie frequently used the word "scorecard" to describe what they were looking for – a regular, perhaps quarterly, communication that would show at a glance how ACCA's activities are achieving its priorities.

Finally, in terms of my overall observations, I would note that there seemed to be **some tension between how many things people suggested ACCA do, and how small an organization it is.** The discussion of purposes of ACCA was perhaps most useful in addressing how participants thought ACCA could focus or prioritize its work (see below). By contrast, the discussions of desired services and communications were expansive. Scott Vaughan and I conferred and

tweaked the workshop process for Stony Plain to guide participants toward more prioritised outcomes; otherwise, these parts of the discussions tended to produce laundry lists of everything that might be of value to someone. The communication and member-engagement suggestions alone would swamp an organization of ACCA's size. This was particularly evident when a couple of participants suggested the member engagement strategies of The Co-operators (a large firm) as a model for what ACCA should do. It would not surprise me if staff find it hard to listen to such conversations when they are no doubt keenly aware of how little they have to work with. As a result, I think such comments require interpretation by the board.

I would suggest that these comments be interpreted positively: people want more of ACCA. They want more communications. They have many service ideas. But it seemed to me they were freely offering so many suggestions precisely because they trust the board and leadership of ACCA to take these suggestions sensibly into account, not to try to do everything. Participants answered the questions they were asked (what services should ACCA provide; how would you like to be engaged) with ideas, not demands. I come back to the previous message, that ACCA should prioritize and report against priorities, and I think the services and communications suggestions should be seen in this context, as suggestions to go into a prioritization discussion by the board and planning by management and staff.

With those general comments, I would like to turn to what was likely the main and most intensive conversation at the sessions, namely the purposes or focus of ACCA.

FOCUS OF ACCA

The structure of the sessions required participants to reflect individually, in small groups, and in large plenary on the key question, what is ACCA's purpose going forward? This was an entirely bottom-up process, with no prompts or starting template. Participants began with blank pieces of paper ("placemats") for their individual reflections, and blank cards for their ideas in small group work. The facilitator then called on them, through a guided process, to identify which of the ideas coming from individuals and small groups were most important. (Participants could choose up to three.) The workshop results therefore reflect both the words or concepts generated by the participants in response to the open-ended question, and a sense of how many participants strongly supported each one. (Details may be found in the Appendix.)

Because the process was bottom-up, it produced different results in the two locations.

In Airdrie, participants identified a fairly clear top four purposes for ACCA. For simplicity I have added my own one-word descriptors in square brackets []:

- PROMOTE THE CO-OP BUSINESS MODEL (N=15) ["AWARENESS"]
  promoting the co-op movement, promoting the co-op business model, promotion of co-ops as a viable option

- DEVELOPING CO-OP YOUTH LEADERSHIP (N=14) ["YOUTH"]

- ADVOCACY TO GOVERNMENT (N=12) ["GOVERNMENT"]
  ensure government understands co-ops, advocacy of the co-op model, advocating for co-op friendly policies, promoting AB co-ops to general public and government

- NETWORKING CO-OPS (N=12) ["NETWORKING"]
  give members a voice, single point of contact for information, connect co-ops provincially and nationally, avenue to share ideas and information

Those were followed by ACCREDITATION FOR CO-OPS (N=9; includes standards, validation, safeguarding co-op principles; EDUCATION ON CO-OP MOVEMENT (N=7; includes CO-OP 101, think tank of co-op knowledge, research on co-op issues); and NEW CO-OP DEVELOPMENT (N=8: help start new co-ops, promoting economic diversification in communities).

Stony Plain had a different list – again, I have added my own one-word descriptors:

- NETWORKING SERVICES AND SUPPORTS FOR ACCA MEMBERS (N= 14) ["NETWORKING"]
  bring co-op members together to share ideas and information; undertake activities to ensure co-op growth and stability within the sector.

- CO-OPERATIVE DEVELOPMENT (N=12) ["DEVELOPMENT"]
  Help new co-op start-ups; assist with the development of new and existing co-ops; development of ODCs; co-op development areas not already being addressed by members

- CO-OP EDUCATION AND AWARENESS (N=12) ["AWARENESS"]
  promote and educate in the co-op model; promote awareness of co-ops to the general public, share co-op principles

Those top three were followed fairly closely by YOUTH DEVELOPMENT (N=10) and by GOVERNMENT RELATIONS (N=9). Another purpose, CO-OPERATIVE RESEARCH AND DISSEMINATION, had been considered important by a number of participants in its own right, but when placed alongside the other proposed purposes no one chose it as among the most important (N= 0).

So to summarize, the two workshops chose the following as their top priorities, using the one-word descriptors I have assigned above:

- **AWARENESS – YOUTH – GOVERNMENT – NETWORKING**

- **NETWORKING – DEVELOPMENT – AWARENESS**, with YOUTH and GOVERNMENT closely following

I believe a reasonable way to interpret these outcomes (bearing in mind also the individual written feedback) is as follows:

> **Awareness-building** is on both lists and stands out strongly in the written feedback. Under this heading are activities like building awareness of the co-op model as well as general promotion and education about co-operatives. These functions are also connected to government relations and co-op development, where a number of

comments indicate that when they wrote government relations, they were thinking about making officials aware of co-ops; and when they wrote co-op development, they were thinking about general information and responses to inquiries rather than necessarily specialized or technical development services. Building awareness of and promoting the co-op model are ideas that cut across many responses.

Networking among co-ops is the other function that stood out when participants identified their top purposes for ACCA going forward. Here people meant bringing co-ops together, having them make connections with each other and share information, and helping them have a common voice. The points under these headings overlap with government relations (common voice) and co-op development (undertaking activities to strengthen the sector). Again, people have different ways of expressing it, but networking, like awareness, stands out as a primary purpose for participants; and these things in turn help define what ACCA's role might be in other functions like government relations and co-op development.

Youth programs were near the top for one group and near the bottom for the other, but I believe these disparate results need to interpreted in light of the more detailed feedback. The group that ranked youth programs relatively lower also mentioned youth under its "Education and Awareness" category, so youth programs were in two places. And it is clear from the individual feedback that some stakeholders see these programs as the primary purpose of ACCA. The way I would characterise it is that many participants see youth programs as a priority; some see these programs as *the* priority. Given this, I believe a fair way to read the feedback is that youth programs belong in the top three purposes of ACCA alongside awareness-raising and co-op networking. But interestingly, they are not at the top, overall, among participants.

Awareness-building, networking, and youth programs stand out for me as the best headings under which to capture most participants' views of ACCA's purpose and priorities. There are some nuances in the discussion and written feedback, however, which the board will have to interpret, particularly as regards co-op development and government relations. I think there was also participant support for ACCA to have roles in these areas, but this support was qualified in interesting ways:

Co-op development was a strong theme for many participants, but there was considerable diversity of views about what exactly was meant. A number of comments suggested ACCA be ready to help people with general information about co-ops and referral to other resources. Some suggested more specialized development services on a fee-for-service or cost-recovery basis. Some suggested ACCA focus where others are not already active, such as where sectoral federations do not exist. Some suggested that ACCA has a role in developing new models like ODCs. Most appear to have been thinking about development of new co-ops. It seems to me that a number of activities under this heading could also be understood as awareness or network-building.

Government relations was a prominent theme and a priority for many participants, but it became apparent that people meant different things by it, and that much of what was meant by some participants could be captured under the heading of awareness of the

co-operative model, thinking of government officials as an audience for awareness-building efforts. Some participants warned of the possibility of divisiveness, and that care must be taken for ACCA only to represent common positions of all co-operatives, or the issues related specifically to the co-operative form as a general business form. The clearest discussion was in Stony Plain, where some participants made the point in plenary that "lobbying" is not what was intended, and that whatever ACCA does needs to work around and dovetail with what its members do. My impression was that people saw a general role for ACCA, not a standalone or specialized role.

Based on what I heard and read, I would say a reasonable conclusion would be that three broad areas constitute a core of what ACCA exists to do in the minds of most participants:

- **Promote awareness of the co-operative business model.**
  Promote awareness of co-ops to the general public, promote the co-op movement, promote co-ops as a viable option, share co-op principles
- **Network co-operatives to share information and work together**.
  Bring co-op members together to share ideas and information, undertake activities to ensure co-op growth and stability within the sector, give members a voice, provide a single point of contact for information, connect co-ops provincially and nationally
- **Develop co-op youth leadership.**
  Educate youth about co-operatives, educate youth in the co-op business model and leadership, educate youth on co-op values

I believe ACCA will have to think carefully about where co-op development and government relations fit alongside or underneath these priorities.

I have offered my own interpretation, as well as enough information, I hope, for the board to make its own collective interpretation of participants' views.

SERVICES AND FUNDING

When asked about services, participants went into brainstorming mode and made long lists of things ACCA could do. Where it got especially interesting is where they were asked about funding – where they were required to prioritize. The sessions provided a rough sense of participants' views about what should be funded from dues as part of a core budget, and what activities should depend on supplemental income from fees and sponsorships.

Overall there was a positive message: "Yes" people are willing to pay for ACCA's activities and services. But consistent with other messages, they want clearer ties between the money they pay, the specific activities it pays for, and reporting back on what is accomplished.

The table groups in Stony Plain had the most focused discussion on the topics of dues and fees. Of the four table groups:

- ¾ said member dues should cover ACCA administration, including administration of youth programs and of conferences but not the costs of attendees

- ¾ mentioned communications with members, accountability and outcomes reporting as part of this core

- there also seemed strong support for dues to cover the basic work of promoting the co-op model to public and government; being a point of contact; and offering general help and advice to co-ops when asked.

It isn't clear that participants were expressing a desire to pay higher dues than at present; that kind of information did not come out in the discussion. The ACCA board will have to determine what the member feedback means in terms of level of dues. It did seem clear, though, that members were insisting that their dues fund a coherent, clear, focused mandate covering purposes like the above. Their insistence, including on clear reporting, implies a lack of confidence in putting more dues into the existing structure. An extrapolation of the tone of the member comments might be that they want to see the above (dues funding to clear, core purposes only, and reporting back on this basis) before being willing to explore higher dues.

Regarding fees for particular activities and services, there seemed, overall, to be a strong message about being willing to pay. Participants mentioned the following:

- webinars and educational events

- registration for networking events

- training services, such as for employees

- youth program (sponsorship of participants)

- specialised services

- professional co-op development services

- skilled lobbyists (some participants in favour of this, some not)

A number repeated that their organizations might make in-kind contributions to activities and projects (staff, expertise) rather than paying fees to support those activities or projects.

One thing that struck me in the sessions was that the language of ACCA providing "services" to members did not seem to resonate with all participants. In particular, questions like "how does ACCA help your organization?" elicited weak answers, including "It does not", "I am not sure", and "right now our organization is helping ACCA" rather than the other way around. When asked to list services ACCA should provide, some respondents seemed to struggle somewhat to name things of direct benefit to their organizations.

It seems to me that there are two ways of thinking at work among the participants: a "service" mentality and a "mission" mentality. Most of the comments above about ACCA's purpose, and also about what member dues should fund, indicate activities that would *create value for the co-op sector as a whole*: "public value," in other words, like more people being aware of co-operatives, co-ops sharing information, youth being educated. These things benefit all co-ops, not just one particular co-op that individually receives the service ("private value" for that co-op). Roughly speaking, the member feedback suggests that *member dues should support the core mission of ACCA, which is to create public value for the co-op sector*, whereas *fees for*

service or individual sponsorships cover those activities that provide individual benefits to particular co-operatives, such as training for their members. The correlation is not perfect, but the ACCA board might want to work with the following distinction:

- **core mission – creation of public value – dues funding**
  (also general administration and communications as some respondents noted)

- **extra activities – benefits to individual co-ops – fees or sponsorships**
  (including event attendance)

There seems to be an acceptance by many participants of ACCA as a mission-driven not-for-profit association performing tasks in which members participate, rather than a commercial model of (only or mainly) providing services to its members. Only a small number of participants insisted on practical services to benefit their co-op. I wondered whether those wanting specific, concrete services might be those from smaller or isolated co-operatives, but I have no evidence one way or the other.

The board has the political and contextual knowledge to judge what would work for ACCA. I can only say that what I heard the participants say hung together loosely as indicated above.

COMMUNICATIONS AND ONGOING MEMBER ENGAGEMENT

The individual and small-group comments provided many ideas for possible forms of communication with ACCA members and engagement by members. For the most part, I think it will be up to ACCA management and staff to consider these ideas (after the board has signalled direction on matters of purpose, mission, and priority) and determine which activities fit ACCA's situation and are feasible.

One important observation would be: **participants saw communication as important and suggested many ways it could be different and better**. The implication is that current methods are not working – essentially no one expressed satisfaction with the status quo.

Among the many ideas suggested, several families of approaches stood out to me. These did not seem to be alternatives, but rather a suite of different kinds of activities that together would work for many people:

- regularly updated website with key information
- regular electronic communications – perhaps quarterly (some said more often, some said less), linked to ACCA priorities, indicating progress and changes over time, alerting members to successes, problems, or opportunities
- in-person communications – perhaps annually, possibly accomplished at The Gathering or a similar event, or by ACCA representatives participating in members' meetings
- opportunistic communications – around other events or particular issues

The preceding ideas are *tactics*. Participants expressed considerable flexibility about tactics, and appropriately so. They offered suggestions but avoided being firm. Many indicated support for an event like The Gathering, for example, while also indicating that it needn't be

exactly like that. The tentativeness of the suggestions is really, I would argue, respect for board and staff who will need to develop the communications plan.

When I hear discussions of communication, two things I listen for are *who is the audience?* and *what is the strategy?* Frequently these important questions are passed over and people move immediately to suggesting tactics. This was the case in the Airdrie and Stony Plain sessions.

More thinking is needed about audience and strategy. Reading between the lines, I think what people were asking for was *regular contact between ACCA and a network of key contacts within member organizations*: board members and staff in ACCA member organizations who are interested in ACCA and who can connect to other people in their own organization. I did not hear many calls for ACCA to communicate with individual co-op members, or with all directors and all staff of all co-operatives; I don't think most people were calling on ACCA to have high public profile in the co-op movement. I think it was about key informants who can pass information two ways – speculatively, perhaps a couple of hundred key individuals in Alberta.

Again reading between the lines, it seems to me the strategy behind the communication was *to provide these key informants with the information they need to perform their roles* with respect to ACCA. They need to know how well ACCA is doing in order to explain its successes to others. They need to know what ACCA is working on and looking for in order to broker contacts within their own organizations. They also need to learn, presumably through ACCA's networking role, something about what is going on in other co-operatives.

These comments are necessarily somewhat speculative. I think the members have given the ACCA board, management, and staff many ideas to work with, but clear thinking about audience and strategy will be needed before ACCA can select its member-engagement tools.

DIFFERENCES AND GAPS

In the preceding sections I tried to focus on commonalities – what I heard that seemed to resonate across numerous participants. I also want to reflect briefly on what differences and disagreements surfaced and what minority or outlying opinions were raised. There were not many of these:

- rural versus urban: some argued that ACCA's mission has to do particularly with ensuring rural sustainability; others called on ACCA to do urban outreach. Youth leadership development was an area where this arose: both rural and urban stakeholders want it to occur in their settings.

- large versus small: in the sessions themselves, I couldn't discern particular issues or interactions that seemed to be pitting large organizations against small ones. However, some participants expressed a concern that all stakeholders participate and be heard; that discussions not be overly dominated by large organizations. Also, as I have mentioned, I wondered whether some calls for specific services might be coming from smaller members.

- different intensities of desired communication: I noted some participants who wanted personalized one-on-one annual accountability meetings, while others would be satisfied with regular newsletters.

- special interests: having ACCA do or broker research about co-ops was very important to a few, but not to the majority

- ditto accreditation or certification of co-ops – this was a significant theme in Airdrie, whereas many participants in Stony Plain had no idea what it was about

- co-op development – some sectors (notably worker co-ops) expressed the view that they have sectoral development services, and ACCA should work with these and fill gaps

- interest in "community" – some participants emphasized the role of ACCA in promoting *community* development (not just co-ops), and a number stressed the importance of reaching out to non–co-operative organizations as members. Overall, though, these were minority concerns. No one argued that non–co-operative organizations with like values should be excluded. But the predominant sense through all the comments was that ACCA is especially about and for co-operatives.

I also expected to hear more about Aboriginal communities given Alberta's location in the Prairies and the recent national report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Almost no participants specifically mentioned First Nations, Métis, or Inuit communities, though one person told me this was what they were getting at when they suggested co-op development services for hard-hit communities. I thought the lack of Indigenous perspectives in the conversations was the biggest gap. I did not note any participants who identified themselves as Aboriginal. In some other respects there was diversity in the room – women, new Canadians, young people – though I think in all these cases not proportionate to the population of the province. Engaging the views of such groups might be something for ACCA to consider in future planning, communications, and activities.

CONCLUSION: PUTTING ACCA INTO PERSPECTIVE

According to the stakeholders in Airdrie and Stony Plain, co-ops in Alberta want to have a clear focus on areas of common work, and a sense of progress towards goals. They want the public to be aware of the co-operative business model. They want co-ops to network and share information. They want youth to be developed and engaged as leaders. They want governments to be responsive and new co-ops to emerge. They want to know how to help out with these tasks, how to be engaged, how to plan and fund and work together.

Do these concerns reflect problems or failures specific to Alberta?

In a recent Canada-wide survey by the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives, the #1 issue on the minds of co-op leaders was "Co-operation among co-operatives" – figuring out better ways for co-ops to work together. It was followed closely by competitiveness (#2), government relations (#3), public awareness of co-ops (#5), youth engagement (#6), and co-op development (#9). (See: http://usaskstudies.coop/documents/pdfs/Top%20Co-op%20poster%20final.pdf)

In other words, the concerns of Alberta co-op leaders as voiced in the ACCA member-engagement sessions are also among the top-ten concerns of co-op leaders everywhere in Canada. Alberta co-operatives and ACCA need to find solutions that fit their province. But nothing they are concerned about is unique or strange.

Globally the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) released *Guidance Notes on the Co-operative Principles* in 2015 that included a number of comments about the role of "third-tier" co-operative organizations (http://ica.coop/en/blueprint-themes/identity/guidancenotes). While usually the ICA sees a third-tier body as a national association of co-operatives, in a federated state like Canada it is worthwhile asking who performs the functions identified by the ICA at the level of a province like Alberta. For each of the functions identified by the ICA, one can ask, who will do this in Alberta? The individual co-ops? Co-operatives and Mutuals Canada? Or, is this a job for someone like ACCA? The ICA says co-operative apex organizations have the following responsibilities in relation to the co-op principles:

- "to protect the effectiveness and reputation of the co-operative movement in their country by promoting sound democratic and good governance practice" (in support of the 2nd principle, democracy)

- "to achieve effective government support for co-operatives without its resulting in undue government influence over co-operatives" (4th principle, autonomy)

- to ensure members, employees, politicians, and general public know about the social, cultural and economic benefits co-operatives provide. Note that the principle places special emphasis on young people and opinion leaders, including educators. (5th principle, education, training and information)

- "strategic positioning of co-operatives as a leading business model, proudly demonstrating they are democratic institutions, leaders in stakeholder participation and in facilitating genuine community engagement" (6th principle, co-operation among co-operatives)

- And: "Larger more established co-operatives or co-operative groups should take a close interest in inter-co-operative engagement and links with smaller co-operatives, newer co-operatives and those at different stages of development."

It doesn't have to be ACCA that does these things; but are some of these ACCA's roles? And if they are, perhaps the ICA's language above may be helpful.

In closing, I think the member engagement sessions show that ACCA has exceptionally committed members and staff. Many good people seem to be focused on the right kinds of co-op issues, and they have a wealth of suggestions and a few really important key messages. I feel the board of ACCA has excellent ideas and people to work with. I am glad to have played a role in conveying this information to the board and I hope it will be helpful.

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